Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

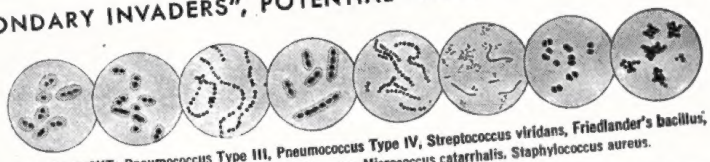
15¢

SECOND JUARY UMBER **SMOKY ROAD** a Vigorous, Gun-Slamming Serial by **FRANK GRUBER**

Get after GERMS before they get after you!

"SECONDARY INVADERS", POTENTIAL TROUBLEMAKERS

These are some types of the threatening germs that can cause so much of the misery of a cold when they invade the body through throat membranes.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus viridans, Friedlander's bacillus, Streptococcus hemolyticus, Bacillus influenzae, Micrococcus catarrhalis, Staphylococcus aureus.

Tests made during a 12 year period showed FEWER COLDS, MILDER COLDS for twice-a-day users of LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

At the first sign of a COLD or SORE THROAT

Gargle LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

This prompt precaution may help "nip a cold in the bud", so to speak, or lessen its severity. Here's why:

Listerine Antiseptic quickly kills millions of threatening germs called "secondary invaders". . . the very ones that many authorities hold responsible for much of the misery of a cold.

Reduces Surface Germs

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Repeated tests have shown that 15 minutes after the Listerine Antiseptic gargle germs on the mouth and throat surfaces were reduced as much as 96.7%, and as much as 80% one hour after.

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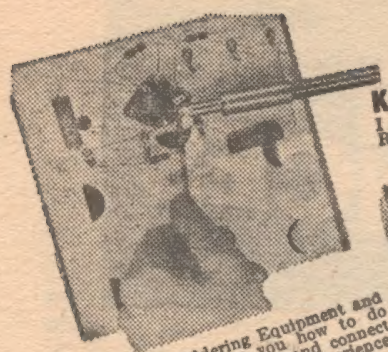
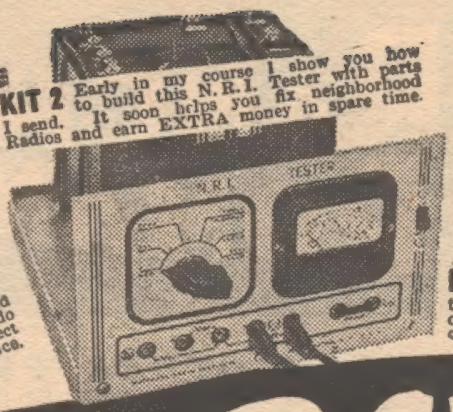


KIT 1 I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio Soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.

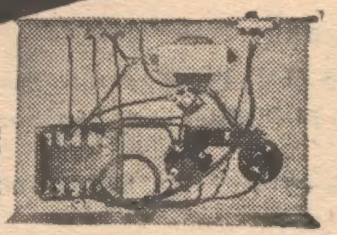


KIT 2 Early in my course I show you how to build this N. R. I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.

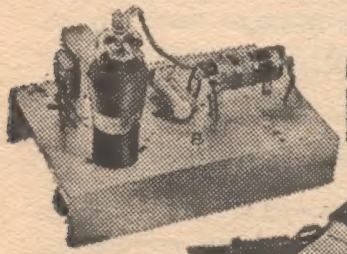
KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.

Learn RADIO by PRACTICING in Spare Time

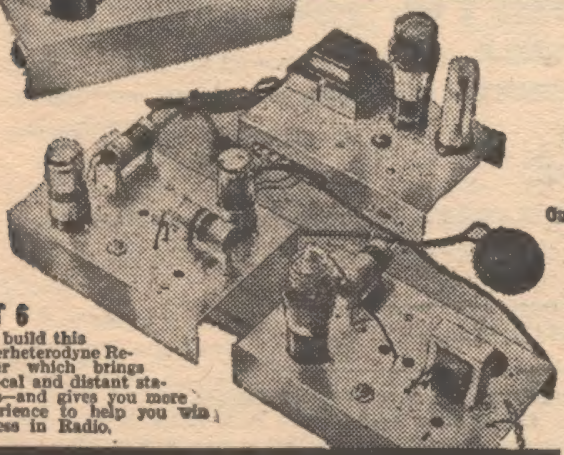
with BIG KITS of RADIO PARTS I send you



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5 Building this A.M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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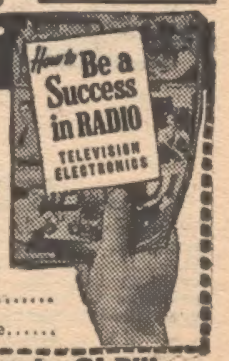

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ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

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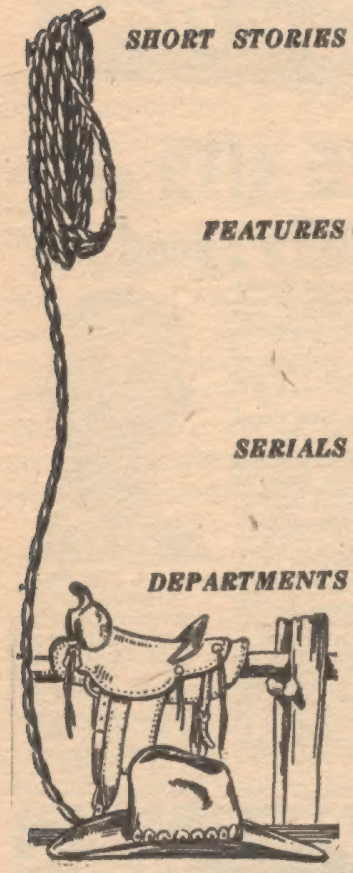

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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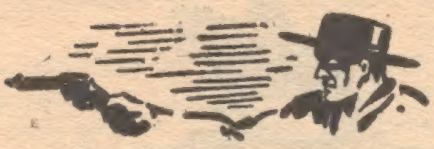
Awaiting You in the Next Issue

SYNDICATE MAN



By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Because he rode for a syndicate he was said to have no soul, no conscience because his gun shot swift and true. Yet among his enemies there was a girl who loved him.

Guns of Hatfield Valley

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

A Ranger returns to the place he once called home, to arrest a childhood playmate. Two women meet him—one old and fanciful, one young and lovely, but both with guns.

Swift-Paced, Human Short Stories by Those Well Known Western Writers. . . .

STEPHEN PAYNE **AGNES NAFZIGER**
JAMES W. ROUTH **L. ERNENWEIN**

And a Real-Life Story of the Early West Told by One of the Last of the Old Trail Drivers

COLONEL JACK POTTER

ON A SAVAGE AND RAW frontier Jim Ralls stood up strong and gun-swift and unafraid, though the peril-filled road he traveled was often clouded with the dark smoke of blazing guns

PART ONE

AN EMIGRANT train, seeking the shortcut to the golden land on the Pacific Coast, had once toiled up the eastern slope of this mountain and looking down the almost vertical western side had abandoned all hope. One member of the train had blown out his brains and had been buried here on the crest of the mountain.

The wooden cross that marked the rocky grave was weathered and rotting, and in a few years more would be gone.

Ralls, dismounting a few feet from the old wooden cross, barely glanced at it. He had seen other crosses and sometimes when the graves had been shallow he had seen bones. The West had taken many lives, and some day it would take the life of Jim Ralls.

Perhaps the valley below would be Ralls' resting place. For Ralls, unlike the emigrants, had no intention of turning back from this spot. He had no wagons, no women or children to get down this precipitous mountainside. He had only himself and his two horses, the eighteen-year-old black gelding he rode and the shaggy-looking pack horse that carried his gear. And they were as sure-footed as mountain sheep.

The valley, from where Ralls stood, looked like a vast horseshoe. A haze that hung above the ground concealed the floor of the valley, but Ralls, judging from the green slopes of the mountainside, thought that the valley would be green, too.

He took down the canteen from his saddle pommel and drank a small quantity of water. Then drawing a deep breath, he mounted the old horse and started it down the steep mountainside. The animal picked its way carefully, testing doubtful spots with a forefoot before putting its full weight on it. Behind it came the pack horse, following its mate but with less sureness.

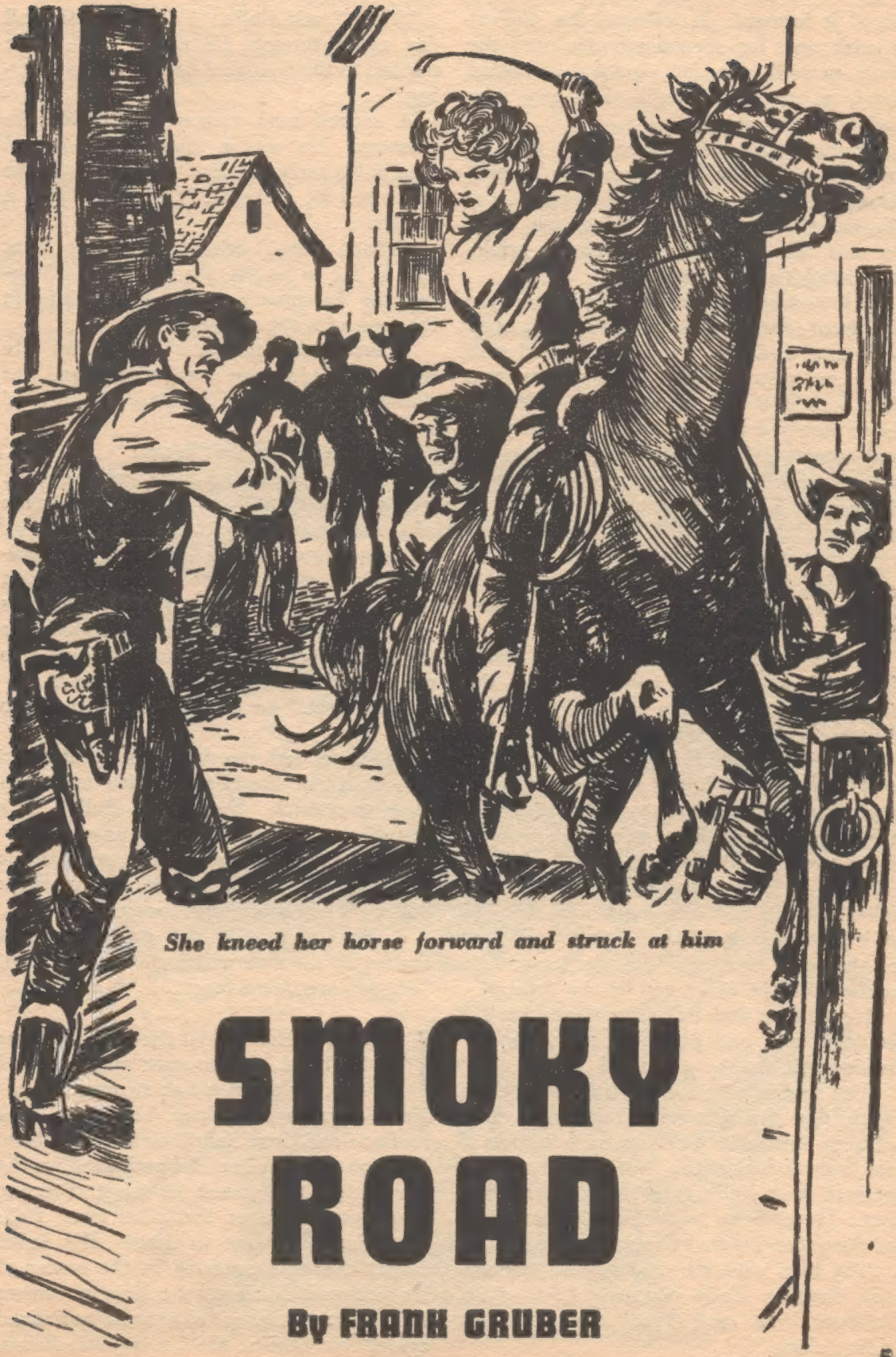
The descent was a slow one. Several times Ralls was compelled to dismount and proceed on foot ahead of the gelding. He was negotiating a particularly bad stretch when the sudden report of a gun below him caused him to stiffen.

Another shot was fired and then a third, and Ralls moved swiftly around his gelding so that its body shielded him, but in that position he realized that the shooting had not been directed at him. He came out from behind his horse and, looking down, saw figures moving about, several hundred yards down.

Even as he watched, there was a fusillade of gunfire, and the sound of angry voices came to his ears.

Twenty feet below Ralls was a narrow shelf of rocky shale. His eyes followed it, and he saw that it widened considerably as it fell rapidly down into the valley.

Ralls descended to the shelf and waited a moment until his animals caught up with him. Then he mounted the gelding and



She kneed her horse forward and struck at him

SMOKY ROAD

By FRANK GRUBER

urged it forward. It followed the shelf at a brisk pace for several minutes until the shelf petered out into grassy mountain slope, at an easier angle than any they had traversed so far.

Several more shots were fired as they traveled along the shelf, but they became fainter as the shelf led Ralls away from the scene of the shooting. But now, since he was traveling down an easier grade, he turned his horse back.

A few minutes later he pulled up in the shelter of several trees and looked out upon a scene of violence. Four men, armed with rifles and pistols, were converging upon a fifth man who had taken shelter behind a fallen pine tree and who had been outflanked and wounded. The man was standing up behind the fallen tree trunk and was yelling defiance at his enemies, emptying his gun at them ineffectively with his left hand. His right arm hung limp at his side.

One of the attackers suddenly skidded to a halt, threw up a rifle and, taking aim, fired.

The pistol flew from the wounded man's left hand, and he fell forward across the tree trunk that had been his barricade. The four men swarmed over him.

Wounded and disarmed he still struggled with his captors, but a rope was thrown about his waist, and he was dragged across the rough ground to a standing pine tree, some twenty yards away.

There he was yanked to his feet, the rope taken from about his waist and the end of it thrown over a low-hanging limb. One of the men began fashioning a hangman's noose with the other end of the rope.

It was then that Ralls came out from his vantage spot and put his gelding into a swift trot.

The men ahead were so intent on their work that Ralls came within fifty yards of them before he was discovered. One of the men snatched up his rifle then and pointed it at Ralls. But Ralls ignored the gun. He rode up to within a dozen paces of the group before halting.

The man with the rifle moved forward, still keeping Ralls covered. "All right, stranger," he said, "you can just keep riding along."

"Why," said Ralls, "I've been riding all day and I thought I'd rest a spell." He nodded to the wounded man. "Little hanging?"

A second man stepped up beside the rifleman. He was a huge, heavy-jowled man in his early thirties. "Nothin' you'd be interested in, stranger," he said. "Just a rustler. . . ."

"That's a lie!" cried the captive. That was as far as he got, for the man fashioning the hangman's noose struck him in the face with the rope-end.

"Keep your trap shut!" he snarled. He hit the wounded man a second time and was drawing back for a third blow when Ralls' voice rang out:

"I wouldn't do that again!"

The man with the rope ran forward. "Why, God damn you, I'll give you some of the same."

Ralls raised both of his hands to shoulder height, palms turned outward so that the men on the ground could see his empty hands. He swung his left foot over the saddle pommel and jumped lightly to the ground. He still held up his hands.

"All right," he challenged. "Give it to me."

The man with the rope was about to do just that, but the heavy-jowled man gestured him back. He said to Ralls: "It's just as easy to hang two men as one."

Ralls' body shifted slightly so that his left side was forward. He said quietly: "There'll be no hangings today."

A hush fell upon the group. It was broken by the man with the rope. He said, "Mister, you asked for it. . . . "

HE SUDDENLY let the rope fall from his hand. At the same time the hand shot for the gun that swung from his hip in a well-worn holster. The gun cleared leather—and then Ralls' hands came down. His right was a mere blur as it sped for the low-slung Navy gun at his thigh. Starting a split second after the other man, Ralls beat him with time to spare. His bullet caught the man squarely in the center of his forehead. In almost the same movement Ralls threw himself sidewards and fired again, this time at the heavy-jowled man.

The bullet tore through the man's left arm and threw him off-balance.

The other two men were touching their guns as Ralls shifted quickly and covered them.

"I said there'd be no hangings today."

The men were stunned. The mouth of one of them moved and had to move a second time before words came forth. "Gawd," the man said, "I never saw such drawin' . . ."

"An' shootin'," added the other.

But the heavy-jowled man gripped his wounded arm with his other hand and looked down at the dead man. His face was dark with hot blood.

"You'll rue this day's work," he said thickly to Ralls. "You can't ride fast enough, or far enough, to get away from this."

"As to that," Ralls said, "you'd better get on your horse and start riding yourself." He gestured to the other two men. "And that goes for you, too."

Then the man whom the others had wanted to hang staggered forward. "Wait a minute, stranger," he cried. "You can't let them go." He bent down to scoop up the gun the heavy-jowled man had dropped, but Ralls stepped forward quickly and kicked the gun out of his reach.

The wounded man exclaimed, "Mister, what he said is true. They'll follow you wherever you go." He pointed down at the dead man. "This one's Kirby Jenkins—" he stabbed a forefinger at the wounded man—"Reb Jenkins' brother."

"I'll remember the name," Ralls said.

"Do that," Reb Jenkins gritted through his teeth.

Ralls ignored him. He looked at the other two men. "You want me to remember your names?"

The two men exchanged glances, and Ralls saw fear in their eyes. One of them shook his head. "We only work for the HL."

"Why, you yellow-livered cowards!" cried Reb Jenkins. "You were just as keen on hangin' Ellis as anyone, but this man throws a fancy gun on you, and you start shakin' in your boots." He sneered at Ralls. "I'll tell you their names. The skinny one calls himself Hack Butler and the other one's Fred Anson, and you won't find them at the HL because they won't be working there after today."

And with that Reb Jenkins stalked off. Butler and Anson hesitated, looked worriedly at Jim Ralls, then started off. But Ralls gestured them back. "You're forgetting your partner." He nodded to the dead man, lying sprawled on the ground.

The two cowboys turned back and, picking up the dead man between them, lumbered off toward their horses, which were tied to trees some distance down the slope.

ELLIS, the wounded man, watched them go. "That's a mistake," he said bitterly to Ralls. "Butler and Anson don't amount to much, but Reb Jenkins is the ramrod of the HL and you know what that means."

"I don't," Ralls said.

"I meant the HL Ranch."

"Is the HL Ranch supposed to mean something?"

The wounded man looked at him in astonishment. "Where're you from, Mister?"

Ralls looked up the mountain slope. "The other side."

"How far on the other side? The HL is known wherever there's cattle."

"It's something then?"

"You'll find out. Harley Langford never forgets and he never forgives. He—" Ellis suddenly stopped. His eyes closed in pain, and he swayed on his feet. Ralls,

stepping forward quickly, caught him as he collapsed in a dead faint.

At sundown, however, despite his wounds, Ellis insisted on climbing into his saddle. "I'll be over the mountains by morning," he told Ralls, "and if I ride all day I'll have a good start."

Ralls shook his head. "I don't think you can make it."

"I've got a chance," Ellis said stubbornly, "but if sunup finds me here in the valley I'm a goner. I know Langford and his son, Emmett, and I know Reb Jenkins and Sam Sloane. . . ."

"Sam Sloane?"

"He works for Langford. You know him?"

"I've heard the name."

Ellis nodded. "Worst man in the West and the fastest gun-slinger. Except maybe Jim Ralls."

"Ralls?"

"You've heard of *him*?"

Ralls did not reply for a moment. Then he said: "You've heard about a lot of people, Ellis, I wonder if you've ever heard of a man named Martindale, Rance Martindale?"

Ellis started to shake his head, then stopped. "Martindale," he mused, "Rance Martindale—" Then suddenly his eyes widened. "Yes! Martindale. . . ."

Swiftly, Ralls stepped to the side of the wounded man and gripped his arm so savagely that Ellis winced in pain. "Where've you heard the name?" he cried.

"I'm trying to think," Ellis said. "It was a long time ago. It was—it must have been here in this valley for I've lived here twelve years. It was down at—" He stopped.

"Think, man," Ralls urged. "Think!"

The light faded from Ellis' eyes. "I—I can't remember," he said dully.

Ralls stepped back. For a long moment he looked into the other's eyes. Then he exhaled heavily. "I think you remember, all right."

"Yes," Ellis said, "I remember. I remember something I heard about Jim Ralls. Just a whisper. That he's looking for a man . . . a man . . ." his voice almost died out, "a man named Martindale."

Ralls looked at him steadily, and Ellis picked up his bridle reins. "You saved my life, stranger. Or maybe you only delayed the bullet that somebody's already got in his gun for me. Anyway—thanks!"

He pressed his knees into his horse's belly and rode off. Ralls watched him start up the valley toward the mountains. He watched him for a long time, then he finally went to his own horses and mounted the old gelding.

RALLS slept out that night under the stars, but with sunup he was in the saddle. After riding a while he struck a trail which in time became a rutted road. In mid-morning he saw a ranch house and corrals off to the left, and the rutted road converged with another and became a well-beaten highway.

An hour later, Ralls rode into the outskirts of a town. It consisted of a wide, tree-shaded street of two or three blocks in length. Horses were tied to the hitchrails, and a few people looked covertly at Ralls as he rode down the street. Ralls got the impression that he was expected.

He dismounted in front of a one-story building that had a sign, "Cagle's Place," over the false front, and a smaller one over the door, on which was painted a glass of beer.

He tied the horses to the hitch-rail and ducked underneath to enter the saloon. A heavy-set man who was leaning against the building beside the door, spat out a stream of tobacco juice.

"Hi, stranger," he said casually.

Ralls nodded. "Hello."

He went into the saloon. It was a big, cool room, furnished with tables and a long bar down one side of the room. A bartender was polishing glasses behind the bar. The only other occupant of the room was a lean, sardonic man who sat at the far end of the bar, figuring accounts.

Ralls went up to the bar. "A glass of beer," he said.

The bartender finished polishing a glass and then drew a beer. Ralls quaffed it thirstily. As he set the glass on the bar, the man who had greeted him outside came into the saloon and stopped beside Ralls.

He signalled to the bartender. "Two beers, Herman."

The bartender removed Rall's empty glass and brought two beers. The man beside Ralls picked up one of the glasses and saluted him.

"A good trip," he said.

Ralls drank a little of the beer and set the glass on the bar. "It was all right."

The other man pursed up his lips. "I meant the trip from here on."

"I was thinking of resting a while."

"That mightn't be such a good idea."

"Why not?"

The other man shrugged. "Reb Jenkins brought in his brother. Reb had a bullet in his arm himself. I don't wear a badge because everybody around here knows I'm the Sheriff." He cleared his throat. "Fred Cherry."

Ralls nodded acknowledgment of the introduction. "I suppose Reb told you that he and his brother and a couple of men were going to hang a man?"

"Just a rustler."

"All right, a rustler. But I thought even rustlers got a trial before a judge and sometimes a jury."

"Oh, they do. Meadowlands is a county seat, and we've got a judge right here. But this is cattle country and cattlemen being what they are, well. . . ." The Sheriff squinted. "You got me off the subject. What I started to say was, things are quiet here in Meadowlands, and I wouldn't want any shootin', so, like I was sayin', it'd be best if you just kept on riding."

SHERIFF CHERRY squinted again at his empty glass and discovering that it was empty, signalled to Herman the bartender. "Fill 'em up."

Ralls put a half-dollar on the bar. "Mine, this time."

"Oh, thanks. Thanks, Mister—"

But Ralls didn't respond to the invitation to give his name. He said, "The HL Ranch—it's a big outfit?"

"Biggest in the state. Eighty thousand acres of the finest grass in the country. Sixty thousand head of cattle. Folks been tryin' to get Langford to run for governor. Says he can't afford the time."

At the end of the bar, the lean man looked up from his accounts. "You talk too much with your mouth, Cherry."

The Sheriff gave a start. "Guess I do." He got some beer in his windpipe and choked until the tears ran down his cheeks. Ralls watched him dispassionately.

While the Sheriff was still coughing the door opened and a man stepped in. It was Anson, one of the men Reb Jenkins had denounced the day before. He saw Ralls, and his mouth fell open. Then he clamped it shut, wheeled and popped out of the saloon again.

Ralls picked up his twenty cents change, dropped it into a pocket and, nodding to the red-faced Sheriff, headed for the door. He went through and on the wooden sidewalk outside stopped with his back to the saloon door.

Across the street, Anson was talking to a couple of cowboys, one a young man in his early twenties, the other a weather-beaten veteran. Talking animatedly, Anson chanced to look across the street and spied Ralls. He ran into a store, and the two men he had left started across the street toward Ralls.

Ralls stood at the edge of the wooden sidewalk, his feet planted wide apart, his hands dangling at his sides. The two men approached him, the younger man slightly ahead of his companion. He stopped in the street, ten feet from Ralls.

"You're the man killed Kirby Jenkins," he accused.

Ralls said, "Go home, son."

The man's face twisted. "I'm Emmett Langford. My father owns the HL. Kirby worked for us and you shot him down in cold blood."

"And his brother, too," snapped Ralls. "Don't be a fool, boy. Anson's across the street. Ask him how I sneaked up. Ask him before you make the last mistake of your life."

Emmett surveyed Ralls without conviction. "Fancy yourself as a gun-slinger, do you?"

Diagonally across the street, a girl wearing levis and a flannel shirt came out of a store, mounted a buckskin horse, and sent him galloping toward them.

Behind Emmett the older man crowded forward. "Looky here, stranger," he said, "there's two of us and—"

His words were drowned by the clamor of the galloping horse, which shot forward and was jerked to an abrupt halt between Emmett Langford and Jim Ralls.

The girl's eyes were blazing. "Emmett!" she cried. "Stop it."

"Get away from here, Sage," Emmett Langford growled. "This is the man who bushwhacked Kirby and Reb Jenkins."

"I don't care who he is," the girl called Sage said. "You're not going to fight him."

"I can take care of myself," Emmett Langford snarled.

"No, you can't," the girl said. "You can't fight a man like—like him." She whirled on Ralls. "And you, taunting a mere boy into a fight."

"I told him to go home," Ralls said.

"I'm not afraid of you," Emmett cried. "And don't you go talking to me like I was a kid."

"I'd just as soon not talk to you at all," Ralls replied.

Enraged, young Langford tried to step around the girl's horse to get at Ralls. But the girl kneed the horse forward, and it knocked Langford to one side. At the same time she jerked the animal's head around and drove it up on the wooden sidewalk. Ralls was compelled to step aside nimbly, and the girl struck at him with her riding whip, a stinging blow that seared Ralls' face.

Ralls exclaimed and retreated, but the wall of the saloon brought him up short. The girl pressed forward and struck at him again and a third time. Then she suddenly whirled her horse and began beating young Langford with the whip.

"And that's for you," she cried. "And if it isn't enough I'll tell Dad, and you'll catch some more."

Emmett Langford cried out with each blow and finally, with Sage pursuing him, he broke and ran across the street. The girl followed, raining blows upon his head and shoulders. Langford finally took refuge in a store, and the girl turned her horse for a final survey of the situation. Ralls promptly stepped back into Cagle's Saloon.

Inside he collided with the sardonic Cagle, who had been watching the scene over the top of the batwing doors.

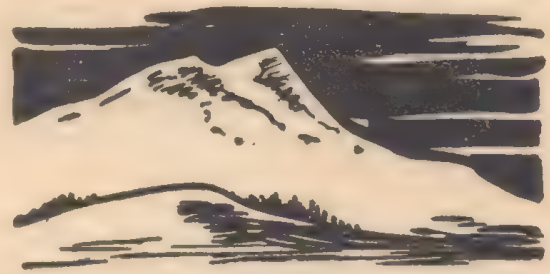
"You've seen a fair sample of the Langfords," he said.

"The girl's young Langford's sister?"

"Yes and no. Emmett isn't really Langford's son, although he's brought him up like he was. He picked up the kid after the Mountain Meadow Massacre."

"That was seventeen years ago," Ralls said. "I didn't know this country was settled at that time." He sized Cagle up.

Ahead of the buckboard, a horse and



"Oh, it wasn't. Langford stopped here right after the Massacre. I guess he was here for three-four years before anyone else settled here." Cagle paused a moment. "That's how he happened to get the valley."

"He just took it?"

Cagle shrugged. "He was strong enough to hold it."

SAGE LANGFORD drove her filly into an easy lope and rode down to the HL ranch buildings. At the corrals she dismounted and threw the reins to a bowlegged cowboy, who ran out to meet her.

"Where's Dad?" she asked.

The cowboy nodded toward a flat-roofed white building. "In his office, I guess."

Sage strode toward the building, slapping her doeskin boots with her riding whip. As she walked with long strides she looked more like a boy than ever, except for her golden hair, which cascaded over her shoulders, although it was supposed to be tied down with a hair ribbon.

Near the office building was a gnarled old cottonwood tree, under which was a circular wooden bench. Reb Jenkins, his left

rider loomed out of the darkness. A voice challenged, "Langford?"

arm supported in a bandana sling, got up from the bench.

"Here you are, Sage," he said gruffly.

"Yes," Sage retorted, without slackening her pace.

Reb scowled. "Where've you been?"

"Minding my own business."

The foreman stepped in her path. "You can save that for someone else. You'n me are going to have a talk. . . ."

By that time Sage came up and started to circle him, but the foreman of the HL lunged out with his uninjured hand and grabbed Sage's wrist. She stopped and fixed him with a cold glance.

"Let go of my arm!"

He hesitated for a moment, but released her. "Gettin' kinda high and mighty, aren't you?" he asked sullenly.

"No man touches me," Sage snapped.

Reb Jenkins' face twisted in anger, but before he could press the quarrel, Harley Langford came to the door of his office and held up an imperious forefinger.

"Reb!" he called.

Harley Langford was fifty, but looked years younger. He was the biggest man on the ranch, standing six feet four in his stocking feet, with shoulders in proportion. He weighed well over two hundred pounds and not an ounce of it was fat. He could do anything any man on the ranch could do, and he could do it better.

REB JENKINS started for the office, but Sage, walking faster, passed him.

"Dad!" she exclaimed. "I want to have a talk with you."

"Later, Sage," Harley Langford said. "I've some business to take up with Reb now. . . ."

"It can wait," Sage cried. "This is important."

"So's my business," her father replied in annoyance.

"As important as Emmett's life?"

"What's that?"

"I just kept him from being killed."

Harley Langford looked sharply at his daughter, then shot a quick glance at his foreman.

"All right, Reb," he growled.

"He can hear what I've got to say," Sage said. "It concerns him as much as it does the rest of us. The man Emmett was going to fight was the same one who—who shot him." She nodded at Reb.

Reb exclaimed. "You mean he had the nerve to come down from the hills?"

"He was in Meadowlands an hour ago."

"Sage," Harley Langford said impatiently, "you're getting yourself all involved again. Did Emmett have a fight?"

"I've been trying to tell you—they were just about to draw and shoot it out when I stopped them."

"How do you mean, you stopped them?"

"Just what I said. I rode in between them and—" Sage winced a little. "Well, I used this." She held up her riding whip.

Langford stared at the whip. "You *what?*"

"I hit them with this. Emmett, as well as the stranger."

Langford cried out. "You struck this—this gunfighter with your whip?"

"Of course. He was taunting Emmett, and you know that fool brother of mine. He'll accept a dare from anyone, whether he stands a chance or not."

Langford suddenly grunted. "And this terrible gunfighter turned tail and ran when you beat him with your whip?" He made an impatient gesture. "I don't think Emmett was in any danger."

"Oh, no?" Sage's lip curled. "You forget what that man did yesterday to Reb . . . and the others."

"I told you we got bushwhacked," Reb Jenkins snarled. "He got the drop on us when we weren't expecting him."

"That isn't what Bill Anson and Hank Butler said."

"Those yellow-livered cowards!" Reb snapped. "I fired them for turning tail yesterday, and they keep on blabbin' they're going to get—"

"What Kirby got?" The words came out before Sage realized what she was saying, but as Reb's eyes glowed she realized that the gibe had been a cruel one. "I'm sorry, Reb. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's all right," Reb grated. "Kirby got it, yes, but I'm not forgettin' it. If it wasn't for this arm I'd be riding into town right now. . . ."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Reb," Harley Langford said curtly. "He'll be taken care of. In fact," he hesitated, and his eyes went past Sage and Reb, toward the bunkhouses at the far edge of the cottonwoods. He drew a deep breath. "Tell Sloane I want to see him, Reb."

"Sloane!" cried Sage. "That—that murderer!"

Langford stepped back into his office. "Come in, Sage," he said sharply. "You and I are going to have a little talk."

"I think it's time we did," Sage retorted.

IN THE office, a square room about twenty by twenty, Harley Langford strode to his desk and seated himself in a great chair.

"Sage," he began, "you're twenty-one years old and you haven't had a spanking in more than ten years. . . ."

"And you're not going to spank me now," Sage said, suddenly calm.

"Maybe not," Harley Langford admitted grimly. "But there are times when it seems that nothing less will hold you in line. Like now."

"Because I stopped Emmett from getting into a gunfight?"

"Emmett can take care of himself. He's handled a gun for a dozen years."

"I know," Sage said. "I've watched him banging away out behind the corrals. And I've seen him taking lessons from that killer, Sloane. Sloane's filed down his trigger, and he's taught him how to draw. Emmett does it all nice and fancy. Sloane's showed him how. There's only one thing he hasn't taught him—how to keep the other man from drawing faster!"

Langford was silent a moment. Then he drew a deep breath and shook his head. "Sage," he said slowly, "Emmett isn't my son, but I feel for him exactly what I feel for you."

"I know you do, Dad. And I love Emmett as much as if he *were* my brother. That's why I don't want him killed."

"A man has to take his chances," Langford went on. "He has to fight in this country."

"Now we're getting to the subject I want to talk about. Something's going on around here."

"What?"

"That's what I'm asking *you*."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sage."

"I think you do. It's all around. I can feel it here, in Meadowlands—everywhere. We've got more men on the ranch than we've ever had and they're not doing any more work. And this affair yesterday. Reb hasn't told the truth about it."

"You think one man—this stranger—shot up Reb and Kirby and Anson and Butler?"

"I don't know, but I overheard something in town this morning. Something about Ellis . . . and you."

"What did you hear?"

"That there was trouble between you, and that you'd threatened to run him out of the country." Sage paused a moment. "And they say Ellis has disappeared, and his house was burned down last night."

Harley Langford suddenly got to his feet and came out from behind his desk. There was a frown of concentration on his face, but it eased away as he came to some decision in his mind. "All right, Sage," he said. "I'm going to tell you. Maybe it's better that you know in case something—well, in case I'm not around."

"You think something might happen to you?"

LANGFORD shrugged. "It never has, and it won't this time." He clenched a huge fist. "They think I've lost my grip, but they'll find out I haven't. I'm as good a man as I ever was and when this is all over there'll be just one ranch here, the HL."

"Then you're fighting the other ranchers!"

"They're fighting me. They think I've got too much range, and they're trying to take it away from me."

"Who?"

"Rudabaugh, Allinson, Macfadden, and all the other two-bit ranchers like Ellis. It's Langford against the lot of them."

"But there's room enough for all of them, Dad."

"No man ever has enough land, Sage. If he's got forty acres, he wants eighty; and if he's got a half-million, he wants a million. I've got eighty thousand acres, and it so happens that it's the best grass country this side of the mountains. Well, why shouldn't it be? I was the first man here. I fought the Indians. I made the HL, and I'm going to keep it. I'm not going to give up one inch of my range!"

A little shudder ran through Sage as she watched her father. This was the Harley Langford of whom she had heard, the man who was tougher than any of his riders. It was the man of whom she had heard, but not the one she knew. That was a different Harley Langford.

She said: "So there's going to be fighting . . . and killing."

Boots crunched on hard soil outside, and Sage, turning, saw Sam Sloane approaching the open doorway. Sloane was a man in his middle thirties, old for a gunfighter. He was about six feet tall, with a slight stoop. He was lean and swarthy, had a hooked nose and wore huge mustaches. His face was oddly reminiscent of a vulture's.

He stopped just outside the door. "You want to see me, boss?" he asked, slurring his words.

Sage looked at her father, hesitated, then nodding, went through the door. As she walked past him, Sloane's beady eyes studied her closely, and he even turned slightly to watch her as she walked outside toward the ranch house.

Langford's sharp voice turned him back. "I've got some work for you, Sloane."

"Sure 'nough, boss?" Sloane asked. He entered the office. "Glad to hear it. Things been awful quiet, and me, I'm a man who likes to keep busy."

"I think you'll soon get your fill of work." Langford looked sourly at the gunfighter a moment, then suddenly said: "Do you know Roy Dorcas, Sloane?"

"You mean have I heard of him? Sure, everybody's heard of Roy Dorcas."

"I didn't say that; I said do you *know* Dorcas?"

Sloane held up his hands, palms upwards. "Now, boss, you been hearin' some wrong things about me. You know how people are, give a dog a bad name—"

Langford interrupted him coldly. "You don't have to gild yourself for me, Sam Sloane. I know what you are—a killer. I hired you for that reason only, and you know it. So we can forget all that other nonsense. Now do you, or don't you, know Roy Dorcas?"

Sloane said, "Yes."

"All right. Do you know where to find him?"

Sloane bared his teeth. "Now look, Langford, you said right about me a minute ago. There ain't many things I draw the line at, but if you think I'm goin' against Roy Dorcas—"

"Will you hold that tongue of yours a minute?" Langford snarled at the gunfighter. "Nobody's asking you to go gunning for Dorcas. All I want you to do is find Dorcas and tell him I want to see him."

"I can find him, all right, boss. As a matter of fact, I know just about where to look for him, and it ain't so far from here, but gettin' him to come here is another thing."

"Dorcas will come," Langford said. "Just tell him I want to see him. He'll come, all right."

SHORTLY before five o'clock a little dour-faced man with a scraggly beard pulled out a chair across the table from where Ralls sat playing a game of solitaire.

"You're the man put Kirby Jenkins out of business," he said.

Ralls looked up from his game and gave the little man a quick but thorough examination, then dropped his eyes to his cards and put a black ten on a red jack.

The little man cleared his throat. "I'm Alec Macfadden."

Ralls nodded, but continued to lay out cards. Macfadden exclaimed angrily. "Ain't you got enough politeness to say howdy when a man gives you his name?"

"I don't recall asking you to sit down and talk," Ralls retorted.

Macfadden's mean-loooking little eyes glinted as he looked murderously at Ralls,

but it was wasted, for Ralls refused to look up from his game of solitaire.

"I was going to offer you a job," Macfadden snarled, "but if that's the way you're going to act you can go to hell." He kicked back his chair and stamped off toward the bar, where he ordered a glass of whiskey and downed it in a single gulp, an amazing thing for a Scotchman who knew the value of money and sometimes nursed a two-ounce glass of whiskey for an hour.

Ralls gathered up the cards, then, squared them and pushed back his chair. He looked around Cagle's Saloon and discovered that quite a few customers had come into the place. But the gambling games, he noted, were idle. The patrons were all gathered along the bar, a large group at the street end.

Ralls, starting in that direction, saw eyes suddenly averted. He shifted his course and headed for the center of the bar. Les Cagle left the bar and intercepted him.

" 'Bout supper time, isn't it?" he asked.

Ralls looked toward the end of the bar. "Is it?" He signalled to Herman. "Beer."

The man brought the glass of suds, and Ralls took hold of the glass and waited for the foam to settle. Along the bar the knot of men opened like a flower, and one man came out of the group. He stood a little above six feet and weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds, but every inch of his solid frame was muscle. His face was crisscrossed with little white scars. One ear was mangled, and his nose was slightly askew.

He came toward Ralls, his face thrust forward and head cocked to one side. He said: "I'm Ben Rudabaugh, Mister."

"All right," Ralls said shortly, "say your piece."

Rudabaugh grinned wickedly. "I haven't got a gun—I never carry one."

Ralls said bitterly, "I never saw a meaner bunch of people than around this neighborhood. Everybody wants to fight."

"Seems to me you've been doing a little fighting yourself," Rudabaugh said.

Ralls picked up the heavy beer glass by the handle and crashed it over Rudabaugh's head. The big man reeled back, caught himself on the bar and stood there for a moment, wiping beer and blood and glass from his face.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm glad you did that. Now I can beat you to a pulp, and it won't bother me none afterwards."

"You wanted the fight," Ralls said. He suddenly stepped back and peeled off his coat with a quick tear and shrug. Rudabaugh came forward, walking on the balls of his feet, his hands clenched before him.

A TINY FROWN creased Rall's forehead. Rudabaugh was a fighter. The scars on his face indicated that, and they were verified by the fact that he carried no gun in a land where a gun was as essential as a hat. Rudabaugh carried none because he was a fist fighter and wanted all his fights to be decided by brawn alone.

He came toward Ralls now, with his fists raised. Ralls retreated along the bar, which was not lost upon Rudabaugh. The man was afraid of him, even though he had opened the fight with a savage and unfair blow.

Rudabaugh's right flickered out in a quick feint. He followed through with his left. The blow grazed Rall's shoulder harmlessly as he suddenly stooped halfway to the floor, lunged forward and drove his right fist into Rudabaugh's stomach. The blow stung Ralls' entire arm, for Rudabaugh's stomach was a solid ridge of corded muscle. Rudabaugh went back, yet even as he retreated he chopped down with his right and hit Ralls in the small of the back. Ralls went down to his knees and Rudabaugh, exclaiming in triumph, leaped forward and smashed Ralls' face with his knee.

Ralls' body jackknifed upward and he crashed to the floor on his back. By all rights, he should have lain on his back for a second, until he caught his wind again, but instinct told him that Rudabaugh would not give him that time, and he called upon his reserves and rolled to his left side, so that Rudabaugh's savage kick missed his head.

Then Ralls' hands darted out, caught the heavy boot as it was being drawn back. He twisted it savagely and Rudabaugh crashed to the floor.

That gave Ralls sufficient time to gain

his feet and draw a great breath. Rudabaugh scrambled to his own feet and lunged forward for the knockout, but Ralls retreated. His back touched a table, and he sidestepped quickly as Rudabaugh rushed him, swinging with both fists.

One caught Ralls a glancing blow on the forehead, and Ralls thought that a sledge hammer had struck him. He leaped back, but at that Rudabaugh was the master. He stepped in quickly, drove a terrific blow to Ralls' stomach, and as he bent forward, gasping, straightened him with an uppercut that registered down to Ralls' heels.

A roaring filled Ralls' ears. He was gasping for breath and fire seemed to sear his lungs. He saw his opponent through a haze that seemed to magnify him into a giant. He saw a huge fist sizzling toward him and chopped down frantically on it with his right and as it struck, with his left. It, too, collided with the arm and Ralls opened his fists and clung to the arm with his hands.

Rudabaugh jerked back to free his arm and pulled Ralls with him. Ralls fell against his bigger opponent and buried his face in Rudabaugh's chest.

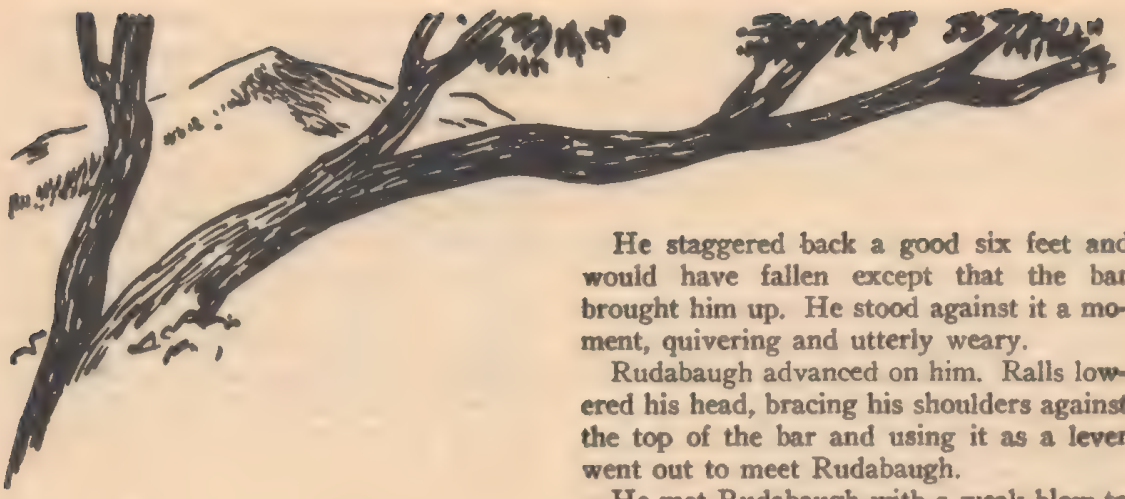
RUDABAUGH tried to shake him off, but Ralls clung for his life.

"Let go," panted Rudabaugh, "let go, or by God—"

He planted his free hand against the side of Ralls' face, shoved furiously. Ralls held his grip for another second. The brief respite was clearing his head, and suddenly he let go of Rudabaugh, or rather he let the big man push him away.

And then as he went back, he struck at Rudabaugh, a hard blow again, into the corded stomach, then another and another. He shot a quick glance into Rudabaugh's face, saw that it was twisted in rage. But it seemed to Ralls that the expression was the least bit strained.

He sidestepped a stinging blow that Rudabaugh should have landed. It was a split second slow and Ralls, sensing that Rudabaugh was tiring, feinted with his left, ducked and sidestepped at the same



time. He crashed a hard right through Rudabaugh's guard and landed on the other man's face. He followed with a left to the same spot, took a crashing blow on the side of his face and leaping in, clinched with Rudabaugh.

The fighter was stronger than Ralls and wrestled him clear, but Ralls, again allowing himself to be shoved back, struck at the stomach once more.

He shot another look into Rudabaugh's face, and now he was sure that the twisted expression was frozen. He moved to the left and Rudabaugh followed.

He feinted and jumped back without a blow. Rudabaugh followed and did not even try to block the feint that Ralls tried again. He was closing in for the kill, was willing to take a blow or two to land one. Rall's back touched a table, and he reached behind him swiftly and gripping the table with both hands, whirled it around and shoved it at Rudabaugh. The big man stumbled over it, fell to one knee, but came up quickly—to take a blow in his face.

His nose was bleeding now, and he shook his head so that drops of blood spattered on Ralls.

"Stand still!" he cried.

"I'm standing," said Ralls. And he did stand for a moment. Rudabaugh came in, his right fist cocked. Ralls smashed him in the midriff with everything he had. Rudabaugh's cocked fist sizzled forward, and exploded on Ralls' jaw and Ralls went reeling back.

He staggered back a good six feet and would have fallen except that the bar brought him up. He stood against it a moment, quivering and utterly weary.

Rudabaugh advanced on him. Ralls lowered his head, bracing his shoulders against the top of the bar and using it as a lever went out to meet Rudabaugh.

He met Rudabaugh with a weak blow to his chin, drove his other fist again into the stomach, hit Rudabaugh in the face, then once more in the stomach—and took a pile-driving blow on his jaw and neck.

He went down to his knees, with his back touching the bar and Rudabaugh could have finished him then. But Rudabaugh stood over him, his feet planted wide apart, his mouth open and gasping for air. He stood there with his fists raised, ready to fight, only he could fight no longer.

Ralls came up, struck at Rudabaugh's face, then again into that muscular stomach. Only this time it wasn't muscular. It was weak and flabby and Ralls' fist went in three inches.

A groan of agony came from Rudabaugh's throat. He still stood on his feet, but only his giant heart kept him there. He was out but refused to admit it.

Ralls drew back his fist for a last blow, but instead opened his hand and placing it on Rudabaugh's chest, pushed hard. Rudabaugh swayed like a giant oak tree—and crashed to the floor. He rolled over on his stomach and lay still, except for a few twitching muscles.

For a moment Ralls stared down at his fallen opponent.

Somewhere a voice said: "You've beaten him."

Then Ralls shook his head, and nausea swept through him. He shuddered and reeled aside. A hand took his arm, a strong firm hand that led him to a door and into a room and helped him to sit down on a cot. Ralls let go then and dropped to his back.

Hands lifted up his feet and deposited them on the cot.

Ralls closed his eyes, and let his outraged body take possession of him. He drew huge breaths of air, exhaled them. And after a while he slept.

ONCE Ralls woke up and was aware that a light was shining in his eyes and that someone was moving about in the room. He forced his eyes open and after a while was able to focus them on a rolltop desk at which a man was seated. The man looked vaguely familiar, but Ralls was too weary to put his brain to the task of recognizing him. He let his eyes go shut and he slept some more.

The next time he opened his eyes the sun was shining on his face. He had more than slept the clock around. He sat up, swinging his booted feet to the floor and was suddenly aware of agonizing pains in various parts of his body. His head ached. He touched his face and discovered three or four bruised, swollen spots.

He drew a deep breath, wincing, then got heavily to his feet and looked around the room. It was about twelve by fourteen and contained besides the cot on which Ralls had slept, a rolltop desk, an iron safe and a couple of chairs.

Ralls stepped to the door and opened it, looking into the barroom where he had fought Ben Rudabaugh. It was deserted except for a swamper, who was sloshing down the floor with buckets of water, and a bartender, polishing glasses. Both men looked curiously at Ralls, but did not speak to him, and he went through the place, out upon the street.

There he discovered that his two horses were both still hitched to the rail, having stood there since the afternoon before without water or feed. Whoever had taken care of Ralls had neglected his horses.

Ralls untied the animals and led them up the street to a livery stable where he arranged for their care.

Leaving the stable, he looked down the street and saw a weathered sign, reading, "Ella's Cafe." He walked to the restaurant and entered. It was a long, narrow room containing a counter, with stools and a half-dozen tables. There was only one customer in it, an elderly, whiskered man who sat on a stool at the end of the counter nearest the kitchen.

Ralls straddled a stool at the front, and a girl came from the kitchen. She was in her middle twenties, a clear-eyed, fresh-faced girl in a crisp white uniform.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully to Ralls.

Ralls nodded acknowledgment. "Good morning. I'd like something to eat."

"Believe it or not," the girl said, "that's what I sell here, food and nothing but food."

"You're Ella?"

"Ella Snow, at your service. With hot cakes and sausage, eggs and ham, coffee."

"All right, I'll have them."

"Hot cakes or—"

"All of them."

"Guess fighting makes a man hungry."

Ralls looked at her sharply, then realized that his face showed the marks of combat.

"You should have seen the other fellow," Ella went on. "He was in here last night."

"Rudabaugh?" Ralls shook his head. "He made a quicker recovery than I did—and I thought I won."

"Oh, you did, all right. Everybody in town's talking about it."

She stopped as the door opened and Les Cagle came in. The saloonkeeper came forward.

"Have a good sleep?" he asked, then without waiting for a reply he said to Ella Snow, "Ella, you get more beautiful every day."

"And you get richer every day," Ella retorted.

Cagle seated himself on a stool beside Ralls. "Not rich enough."

THE GIRL went off to the kitchen, and Cagle looked sidewards at Ralls. "You can fight a bit. That was the first time in his life Rudabaugh ever took a beating."

"It'll probably be the last, because I'm not going to fight him again," Ralls said.

"I wouldn't say there was much future in it."

Ralls shook his head. "Thanks for the use of your bed."

"It's all right. I was going out to the ranch, anyway." He hesitated. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

"The ranch?"

"I'd like you to work for me."

"Why?"

"Because I can use a good man."

"Everybody around here seems to want a man," Ralls said. "A fighting man."

Cagle looked sharply at Ralls. "Who else?"

"Little man with whiskers. Said his name was Macfadden."

Cagle looked down at the counter. Ella brought two cups of coffee and set them before the men and went off again to the kitchen.

"Yes, a fighting man can just about name his own salary these days," Cagle said.

"Range war?"

"I guess you could call it that. Langford against the rest of us. Or you might say the valley against Langford. But don't get the idea that that's a one-sided fight. Langford's a curly wolf, and he's got some pretty rough people working for him. That's why I'm glad you had that fight with the Jenkins boys—and young Langford. Means you won't be on their side."

"Whose side is Rudabaugh on?"

Cagle hesitated. "As a matter of fact, he's with us. You might even say he's our leader. Leastwise he's got the biggest spread outside of Langford's."

"Who else is on your side?"

"The little Scotchman you mentioned, Macfadden, and Allison, and—well, a half-dozen small chaps like me. There was a man named Ellis, but something seems to have happened to him."

"Something happened to him, all right," Ralls said. "He went over the mountain—"

"What do you mean?"

"Ellis was the cause of the trouble I had with the Jenkins boys; they were going to hang him and I stopped it."

"You faced four men just to save Ellis?"

"If I hadn't, Ellis would have stretched rope."

Cagle frowned. "And Ellis lit out after you saved his life?"

"I guess he figured the law wouldn't be of much help."

Cagle grunted. "Well, what about it?"

Ralls shook his head slowly. "I don't know the right or the wrong of it, Cagle, but I don't think I'll sit in—on either side."

Cagle's face showed disappointment. "You'll be riding on, then?"

"Not yet." He looked at Cagle. "Any reason I should?"

"It's hard to be neutral in a war—when the bullets are coming at you from both directions."

ELLA SNOW came from the kitchen, carrying a trayful of food, most of which she set down before Ralls. Cagle received only two slices of toast.

Ella went off and Ralls was eating when Cagle said: "You know, you haven't told me your name."

"That's right, I haven't." Ralls ate another mouthful of food, then said, "It's Ralls."

Beside him Cagle suddenly stiffened. "*Jim Ralls!*"

"Yes."

Cagle was staring at Ralls in astonishment. "No wonder you licked the Jenkins boys." He shook his head. "And you fought Ben Rudabaugh with your fists." He leaned toward Ralls. "Ralls, stay here, work for me just a month. I'll make it worth your while."

"I never worked for a man but once in my life," Ralls said. "And that was Uncle Sam."

"The war?"

Ralls nodded. "And I don't think I'll work for anyone else, until I finish a little job of my own." He paused. "I'm looking for a man."

"Here?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"What's his name? I know just about everybody in the valley."

"The name is Rance Martindale."

The name seemed to make no impression on Cagle. "I don't think there's anyone by that name around here."

"Oh, he's using a different name."

"Well, what does he look like?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you've never seen him?" Cagle asked.

"No."

"Then all you've got to go by is a name." Cagle squinted as his eyes searched Ralls' face. "What makes you think your man is here?"

"Because I've looked everywhere else."

CAGLE exclaimed. "I've heard of you, Jim Ralls. So, I guess, has everybody in the West. A lot of people don't even believe you exist. You're a legend. You're in Texas today, in Kansas tomorrow, in Montana the next day. You've been in the gold camps and the cattle towns, and you followed the Union Pacific across the plains. You've had a lot of fights, and people say you're the fastest man with a gun in the West. You've left a trail of dead men behind you. Personally, I always took those stories with a grain of salt, but what I've seen and heard of you since yesterday has changed my mind. I think the stories are true. In fact, I don't think they've told half enough."

Ralls looked bleakly at his food. "A man gets a reputation," he said, "and there are fools who make you back it up. Like Rudabaugh last night. Only mostly they want to fight with guns. Anybody who's ever hit a tin can with a bullet fancies himself a shot. Yes, I've had to fight—I've had to fight to live. But there's only one fight I've ever looked for. . . ."

"Rance Martindale?"

"Rance Martindale. When I've had that fight—if I win—I take off my guns. For keeps."

"Does Martindale know you're looking for him."

"He knows *somebody's* looking for him."

"But he doesn't know it's you?"

"I think he does."

Cagle's forehead furrowed in thought. "How long have you been hunting for—for Martindale?"

"Quite awhile."

Cagle flushed. "I wasn't trying to pry, Ralls. I thought the length of time might—well, might help narrow your search. I've been here since '68 and I know everybody who's settled here since that time."

"I was looking for him before '68," Ralls said.

Cagle finished his coffee and drummed his fingertips on the counter for a moment. Then he put down a coin and got to his feet.

"I'll see you, Ralls."

Ralls hesitated. He was on the verge of asking the saloonkeeper to keep his identity a secret, but decided against it. Broadcasting his name in the vicinity might serve to smoke out Rance Martindale.

Cagle went out and Ralls finished his breakfast. Ella Snow came out of the kitchen as he was putting down his fork.

"How much?" Ralls asked.

"This one's on the house."

Ralls looked at her in surprise.

"For free, mister," Ella Snow said. "By way of welcoming a newcomer to town." And as Ralls still looked at her sharply: "Or maybe for giving Ben Rudabaugh the licking he's deserved for a long time."

Ralls shook his head. "Whipping Rudabaugh was my own pleasure."

"Then let's say it's for taking me to the peace powwow tonight."

"What peace powwow?"

"Oh, didn't Cagle tell you? The ranchers are having a dance. To get them in the proper mood to talk things over—or, to have a last fling before the war. Take your choice."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be attending." Ralls took a silver dollar from his pocket and laid it on the counter. The girl flushed at his rebuff.

He walked stiffly to the door. With his hand on the knob he stopped and was half inclined to go back and pick up the dollar, but Ella Snow said: "Thank you, sir," and he went out of the restaurant, swearing softly to himself.

HIS HORSES had been fed, watered and curry-combed, and after paying the liveryman, Ralls saddled up and rode out, the pack-horse trailing behind. Two or three men watched him as he rode down the street headed in the direction of Langford's horseshoe-shaped valley.

He was passing the last house on the street when he heard the pounding of horses's hoofs. Turning in the saddle, he saw a rider bearing down on him.

He was a young, redheaded chap mounted on a tough cow pony. He went past Ralls at a full gallop and did not even look at him. It seemed to Ralls, in fact, that he deliberately averted his eyes as he went by.

A messenger, Ralls thought. It didn't matter, for Ralls was always on the alert. He had to be to live. Yet, a half mile from Meadowlands he left the traveled highway and cut across the range. He rode for a half hour, through grass that came to his horses' knees, rich green grass that indicated good soil and plenty of rain.

Ahead was a sizeable herd of Herefords and riding close Ralls noted the HL brand. A short distance beyond was another good herd of Herefords and from then on the range was dotted with HL cattle.

Topping a rise, he saw a well-traveled trail below and crossed to it. He followed it for a mile until it swung to the left and ran up an easy grade to a grassy hill. From the summit Ralls looked down upon the headquarters of the HL. It could be no other from the size and number of the buildings.

A rider who came jogging along confirmed Ralls' opinion. Ralls rode down the hill, following the road into the ranch yard. There was considerable activity at the corrals, he noted, as he rode up, but no one came forward until he reached the office building and was dismounting.

Then Harley Langford stepped out. He stopped when he saw Ralls.

"Lookin' for me?" he demanded.

"If you're Harley Langford, yes."

"I am. But I'm not hiring, although you can get a meal if you go around to the cook shack."

"Thanks, but I've had my breakfast."

"Then what do you want?"

"Why, I just thought I'd drop around and see your place."

Langford looked at Ralls suspiciously. "You wouldn't by any chance be the stranger who picked a fight with my son yesterday?" He shook his head. "Of course not. He wouldn't have the nerve to ride up here."

"Well," said Ralls, "I'm a stranger in these parts, and I did have some words with your son, but if he said *I* picked the fight he didn't tell the truth of it."

HARLEY LANGFORD took a couple of quick steps forward. "But you're the man who killed Kirby Jenkins and winged Reb—" His hand went automatically to the gun at his thigh, but as the hand closed over the butt of the weapon Ralls called out to him:

"Hold it, Langford!"

Langford's hand froze on his gun butt. "You got a nerve comin' here—"

"All right," said Ralls, "I shot it out with the Jenkinses, but did they tell you what they were doing at the time?"

"I don't give a damn what they were doing," Langford snapped. "They were my riders and the HL fights for its own. Right or wrong. Get that, right or wrong."

"Even if they were hanging a man?"

"Ellis wasn't a man—he was a skunk!"

"He deserved killing?"

"He was a rustler and in this country we hang rustlers."

"I thought there was a law that took care of things like that."

Langford's features twisted. "I was here before there was a law, and I can still take care of my own fights." He shot a quick look in the direction of the corrals. "But come to think of it, it ain't fair for me to shoot it out with you. Reb's Kirby's brother. He's got a better claim on you than I have."

"I don't think Reb'll take that claim."

"The hell he won't," Langford sneered. "Just because you got the drop on him—"

"Why don't you call Reb?"

"I will." Langford looked again toward the corrals, but he did not call for his foreman. He looked sharply at Ralls. "Pretty sure of yourself."

"No," said Ralls, "I'm not sure of myself at all. But I've got a job to do and I mean to do it." He paused a moment. "I'm looking for a man. I understand you've been around here as long as anybody. I thought maybe you might know this man."

Langford looked steadily at Ralls.

"What's his name?"

"Rance Martindale."

He was braced, Ralls knew, and yet a

little shiver seemed to run through Langford. The end of the trail was in sight, and Ralls leaned forward in his saddle, so he would not miss the slightest change of expression in Langford's face.

Langford knew!

But Langford said: "Never heard the name."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Langford snapped.

"Martindale is not exactly a name you'd forget, is it?"

"No," said Ralls. "Especially if you've got reason to remember it."

"And you have? What'd you say your name was?"

"It doesn't matter, if you don't know anyone named Martindale." Ralls picked up his reins. "Thanks."

He turned his horse and started away from Langford. And Langford let him go. Which was in itself an admission, for had Langford not been violently upset he would never have permitted Ralls to ride off.

Langford remained in front of his office door; when Ralls was a hundred feet away he was still there. And then Sage came around the corner of the building and saw her father. "Who was that, Dad?" she asked.

"Oh—hello, Sage. I don't know. He didn't give his name."

"He looks like the man I—I struck yesterday," Sage said. "But of course he wouldn't—"

"Yes," Langford said suddenly. "That's the man."

Sage exclaimed, "He came out *here*?"

"You see him, don't you?" Langford said irascibly.

"Yes, I see him," said Sage. "I see him riding away from the HL—after he killed one of its riders and wounded another." Sage looked squarely into her father's face. "And I see a ghost in your eyes, Dad! What did he say to you? Why did he come here? Who is he?"

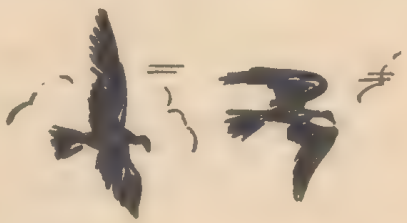
"I don't know," Langford said dully. "Maybe—maybe *he's* a ghost. I don't know."

His shoulders slumped, Langford walked past his daughter in the direction of the house.

THE DANCE was being held in the Meadowlands town hall and a spirit of gaiety prevailed that was not shared by the ranchers who met next door in the office of Judge Gordon. There were ten or twelve men in the room, all ranchers with the exception of Judge Gordon and Sheriff Cherry.

Judge Gordon was doing his best to preside over the meeting but was finding the rôle of peacemaker a thankless one, for none of the men present had come to the meeting with an open mind.

Ben Rudabaugh expressed the consensus of the smaller ranchers. "All this talk of respect for one another's boundary lines is a lot of hogwash and you know it. We're squabbling only for Horseshoe Valley—"



"Which is mine," Harley Langford snarled.

"By what right?" Rudabaugh demanded. "Do you own the land? Did you ever buy it?"

"Did you buy *your* land?" Langford retorted.

"No," Rudabaugh admitted, "I didn't. The land was here and I settled on it—like everybody else."

"And I was the one who settled in Horseshoe Valley."

"On eighty thousand acres. Which is as much as all the rest of us put together have got."

"There's ten million acres of land west of you. Help yourself to as much of it as you want."

"That's desert land, not fit for cattle raising."

Langford glowered. "So it isn't just land you want, it's *my* land."

"You've hogged all the worthwhile land and you know it," Ben Rudabaugh shouted.

"I was here first," replied Langford. "Sure, I took up the best land; why

shouldn't I have? In a gold strike the discoverer takes the best claim, doesn't he? I found Horseshoe Valley and I took it. I had to fight Indians to hold it. And by God, I'll fight anyone who tries to take it away from me."

"You'll get your fight!" Rudabaugh cried. "You'll get it right now." He started toward Langford, but the latter fixed him with a cold eye.

"Lay a hand on me, Ben Rudabaugh," he said, "and I'll pistol-whip you." He sneered. "Looks like you didn't get enough of fighting yesterday."

Rudabaugh was quite conscious of his battered features. His face twitched angrily. "Maybe I owe you for that."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've been hiring some mighty peculiar people lately. Sam Sloane—this stranger, who picked the fight with me."

Langford looked narrowly at Rudabaugh. "Are you crazy? The stranger killed Kirby Jenkins and wounded Reb."

"At least that's your story."

Langford whirled on the Sheriff. "Cherry, pick him up. Throw him in your hoosegow and see if I make one move to do anything for him."

The Sheriff winced. His eyes shot to the face of Cagle, but the latter returned his glance impassively, until the Sheriff looked away. Then a faint derisive grin cracked his features.

The Sheriff cleared his throat a couple of times. "Well, I dunno's I can properly arrest him—"

"Why not? You're Sheriff of this county, aren't you?"

"Y-yes," admitted the Sheriff, "but somebody's got to swear out a warrant—"

"I'll swear it out."

Cagle appealed to the judge. "That all right?"

"Certainly."

Cherry still looked unhappy. "All right," he finally said, "I'll arrest him."

JIM RALLS came into Meadowlands after nightfall, after riding the range of Horeshoe Valley most of the day. He left his horses at the livery stable and proceeded to Ella Snow's restaurant, where he found the place presided over by a Chinese cook. He ate his dinner, then crossed the street to Cagle's Saloon.

The bartender caught Ralls' eye and came over.

"Beer," Ralls said.

The man brought it and Ralls sipped it. He turned away from the bar and was looking at the batwing doors of the place when they bellied inward and Sheriff Cherry entered. He stopped inside the room, searched the crowd and his face fell when he spied Ralls at the bar. He came forward.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly, to Ralls. "But I've got a warrant for your arrest."

"Not tonight," Ralls said.

The Sheriff blinked. "Huh?"

"Some other time."

"I—uh, you don't understand, stranger. I—I've got to put you under arrest."

Ralls regarded the man steadily. "On what charge?"

"The murder of Kirby Jenkins."

"That *your* idea?"

"Uh, no," gulped the Sheriff. "Harley Langford swore out the warrant."

"Then why don't you get him to serve it?"

"Because I'm the Sheriff. That's my job. Uh, this warrant was issued by Judge Gordon." He waited a moment, then a hundred eyes in the room lashed him on. "You've got to come with me."

"No," said Ralls.

A film of perspiration bathed the Sheriff's unhappy face. "It ain't a matter of wanting to come. You've *got* to come."

Ralls made a little shooing gesture with the glass of beer in his hand. "Go away."

Along the bar a cowboy said raucously, "Go ahead, Sheriff, take away his gun."

GOADED, the Sheriff took a step forward. "Give me your gun, or . . ." He reached toward his own holster.

While the rest of his body remained absolutely still, Ralls' right hand made a flicking movement, and the beer from his glass cascaded into the Sheriff's face.

The Sheriff cried out and leaped back. He collided with a man seated at a table and bounced to the floor.

He scrambled to his feet, wiping beer from his face.

"You can't do that to me," he howled.

"It's illegal!" jeered a man at the bar.

The Sheriff picked out the man and pointed at him. "You, Tod Meacham, I hereby deputize you to help me in arresting a criminal."

"Deputize, hell!"

"I can do that, Meacham," the Sheriff said doggedly. "I can deputize anyone I want, and you've got to help me, or go to jail yourself."

"Who's going to arrest *me?*" the man named Meacham asked.

"I am," said a voice at the door.

Judge Gordon came forward, his face dark with anger. "If the Sheriff doesn't arrest you," he said to Meacham, "I will."

The unexpected ally gave the Sheriff sudden confidence. He pointed at another man. "And you, Milo Hanson, I also deputize you." Then he pointed at still another man. "And you, Dave Lawrence."

He turned on Ralls. "All right, Mister, I call on you now for the last time. Surrender, or—"

He squared off significantly.

Ralls set his empty glass upon the bar. The men behind him suddenly scrambled clear, and Ralls found that he had plenty of room. He moved a little away from the bar.

"Sheriff," he said, "I'm not surrendering to you or anyone else."

A hushed silence fell upon the room. The Sheriff had made his play. He had three deputies and a judge to back him up. He had to go through with his arrest. But the stranger had defied him. There was only one answer now. Gunplay.

Then the silence was broken by a cry from halfway across the room.

"It's Jim Ralls!"

The Sheriff flinched as if he had been struck in the face with a fist. "You—you're Jim Ralls?" he croaked.

"Yes!" snapped Ralls.

Sheriff Cherry's deputies suddenly began to back away. "Jim Ralls," one of them said thickly. "I want no part of this."

"Come ahead," Ralls challenged. "If you want to arrest me, draw your guns."

The Sheriff sent a wild glance at his retreating deputies, then his eyes went back to Ralls. "No, no," he cried in panic.

Judge Gordon, his face taut, moved forward. "You're really Jim Ralls?" he asked.

"I am," Ralls declared. "And if you've got a charge against me, I'll appear in your court, but I'll be damned if I'll let any two-bit Sheriff drag me down to a jail."

The judge swallowed hard. "I'll expect you in court."

He turned on his heel and walked out of the saloon. The deputized deputies scurried out after him. Ralls looked deliberately at the Sheriff.

He said: "I'll be around if you decide that you really want me."

And with that he walked past the Sheriff toward the door.

The Sheriff could have drawn his gun then. He could have shot Jim Ralls in the back. But he didn't. His trigger finger was palsied.

Ralls went through the door.

THE HALL where the dance was being held was a low one-story building. There were more than fifty people in the hall but only four or five couples were actually dancing. The others were standing about in small, silent groups.

Outside the building another dozen or so men stood about, talking in low tones.

Jim Ralls came along the wooden sidewalk and stopped near the door. He looked inside, started to pass, then suddenly wheeled and entered the hall.

Inside, he discovered that a small table had been set up just within the door. An elderly man sat behind it. "Your gun, Mister," he said.

Ralls looked at the wall behind the little table and saw a double row of guns hanging from nails. He took out his gun and tendered it to the attendant, butt first.

"Name?"

"Ralls."

The name made no impression on the man. He wrote it on a small tag and tied it to the trigger guard. Ralls moved on into the dance hall proper.

At the far side of the room a four-piece orchestra came to a wheezing finale. The

dancers on the floor separated and Ralls saw that one of them Ella Snow.

She saw him at the same time and came toward him. "So you came, after all."

"Yes," Ralls said. "I stopped by the restaurant, but you'd already left." He hesitated. "Sorry about this morning."

"Oh, it's all right." Her eyes searched his face. "People have been coming into the restaurant all day, talking about you. As a matter of fact I've been doing a lot of thinking about you myself."

Before Ralls could reply to that the orchestra struck up. Ella smiled up at him.

"I'm sorry," Ralls said, "I haven't danced since—"

"Then this is a good time to brush up," Ella said. She held up her hands and stepped toward him.

Ralls groaned inwardly as he placed his right hand on the small of her back. They moved off. Ella lightly and Ralls attempting to lead her awkwardly.

It was eight years since Ralls had danced, eight long years, during which time Captain Ralls of the Fourth Michigan Cavalry had become Jim Ralls the notorious gunfighter and killer.

Ella Snow was talking. "She dresses and rides like a man, and then she can come to a dance and look like that. . . ."

Ralls shot a quick look into Ella's face, saw that her eyes were focused on someone over his shoulder. He swiveled his head and looked into the eyes of Sage Langford. She was dancing with Reb Jenkins whose left arm was in a black silken sling.

She was wearing a dark velvet evening gown and her taffy-colored hair was piled high on the back of her head. Ralls inhaled softly. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Beside her Ella Snow, in her gingham dress, had become a drab farm girl.

Sage's eyes bored into his own. Reb Jenkins turned her away and his own eyes met Ralls'. He scowled and stopped dancing.

"Thought you'd be over the mountain by now," he said, baring his teeth.

"Why, no," Ralls replied. "I'm figuring on staying here in the valley for as long as I please."

REB RAISED the slinged arm. "This'll be better soon."

"You're not left-handed, are you?" Ralls asked, and felt Ella press his hand. He said to her: "Sorry."

"This is a dance, Mister." She cocked her head to one side. "By the way, how long do we keep up the mister business?"

"It stops right now," Ralls said. His eyes were on the door, where several men were just entering. Among them were Sheriff Cherry, Ben Rudabaugh, Judge Gordon and Harley Langford.

The group spotted Ralls and began whispering among themselves.

"My name," Ralls said to Ella Snow, "is Jim Ralls."

He could feel her gasp. "Jim Ralls, the—"

"Yes." He took a couple of steps with her, then relaxed his hold. "And now you can stop dancing with me."

"Why?" Ella asked. "Because you've got hydrophobia?"

"Because I'm Jim Ralls."

She laughed shortly. "I knew you'd fought Kirby and Reb Jenkins, and I knew you'd beaten Ben Rudabaugh to a pulp. All right, I didn't know you were Jim Ralls. But I did think you might be—well, Roy Dorcas, or one of his men."

"It didn't make any difference to you?"

"Why should it? I'm an outlaw myself. Sure, people come to eat at my restaurant. Men. But have you seen any of the ranchers' wives waving at me? Did you hear Sage Langford talking to me a minute ago?"

"It's like that, eh?" Ralls remarked.

Then the music stopped and Ella Snow stepped back from him. "Thanks," she said. "Thanks for dancing with me." She walked off.

Ralls was about to follow her, when he saw Ben Rudabaugh coming toward him.

He waited for the big rancher to come up. There was no enmity in the man's face. Only a sardonic humor.

"Hello, Ralls," he said. "Nice fight, wasn't it?"

"So nice that I'm not going to repeat it."

Rudabaugh chuckled. "I hear you just about gave the Sheriff heart failure."

"I can't help it if he's got a chicken heart."

"Oh, he's got that, all right. But he did shoot a man once. In the back. Just thought I'd mention it." He suddenly changed the subject. "Get anything special in mind, Ralls?"

"Such as what?"

"From what I've heard of you, you don't stay long in one place."

"I plan to stay here awhile," Ralls searched the big cattleman's face. "Didn't Cagle tell you?"

"Cagle? Does he know?" Rudabaugh frowned. "I suppose it's all right, though, if you and Cagle made a deal."

"I've made no deal with Cagle—or anyone."

"You're not on our side, then?"

"I'm on my own side."

Rudabaugh shook his head. "There are only two sides here. Ours and Langford's."

Ralls, looking past Rudabaugh, saw Harley Langford and his daughter talking together animatedly. Langford's face wore a scowl as he talked earnestly, but Sage kept shaking her head.

Ralls turned back to Rudabaugh. "Excuse me." He walked away from the rancher.

SAGE, facing him, saw him approach. For a moment her eyes widened, then they glinted.

"I wonder," Ralls said, "if I could have the next dance?"

Langford, whirling, stared at him in astonishment. "Ralls!" he said thickly. Then his face twisted in sudden rage. "You—how dare you talk to my daughter—"

Sage said quickly: "Why, yes, Mr. Ralls, I'd love to."

At that moment the music started, and Sage held up her hands. Ralls and the girl moved out upon the floor.

"So you're Jim Ralls," she said with unconcealed contempt. "The notorious gunfighter and killer. And I came here tonight, half hoping you would be here, so I could apologize for yesterday."

"That's all right, I accept the intention—"

"I'm *not* apologizing," Sage said furiously. "You *were* taunting my brother into a fight. You killers have to feed your ego every now and then, and the only way you can do that is to kill someone."

"You seem to know quite a lot about killers."

"We've got one out on the ranch—Sam Sloane. You may meet him one day. I think you'll find him more of a match than my brother."

"I don't doubt it. I've heard of Sloane."

"I've heard of you—but nothing good!"

Sage suddenly disengaged her hand and stepped away from him. She crossed the room to her father who handed her a wrap, and they went out together. Only a few couples remained in the hall. Ralls shrugged, retrieved his gun and left.

HARLEY LANGFORD had a buckboard, but used it only for special occasions, such as tonight, when he escorted his daughter to Meadowlands. But he had little patience with the team, and he kept urging the horses along.

Perhaps it was just as well, for he was in no mood to carry on a conversation with Sage.

Sage could stand only so much silence, however, and after they had traveled about two miles from Meadowlands, she finally exclaimed, "All right, let's get it over."

"Get what over?" Harley Langford demanded.

"The quarrel. I don't want to stay up half the night—"

"I'm not going to keep you up," Harley retorted. "And I'm not going to quarrel with you."

"I'd rather have a fight than see you sulk."

"Stop it, Sage. Of course I didn't want you to dance with a man like Ralls. But it isn't that—"

"What is it, then?"

Langford shook his head. "Didn't you see that crowd leave the dance when it was less than an hour old?"

"Yes, but I thought that was because of—well, because the gunman was there."

Langford grunted. "Ralls is one gunfighter more or less. They left tonight when *I* came in."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. We had a meeting tonight." Langford paused a moment. "I told you yesterday what was brewing. Well, it isn't brewing any more. It's boiling now."

Sage exclaimed, "You mean there'll be—fighting?"

"There'll be fighting. And I'll beat them. When it's over this will all be the HL land."

Ahead of the buckboard a hundred yards, a horse and rider loomed out of the darkness. Langford gripped the lines with his left hand, and with his right drew a long-barreled revolver.

"Looks like the first battle right now," he said in a low tone to Sage. "If I have to shoot—duck."

A voice challenged, "Langford?"

Langford made no attempt to slacken, pull up his horses. "Who is it?" he called defiantly.

Flame lanced toward the buckboard. It was followed instantly by the sharp report of a gun. Harley Langford cried out hoarsely, rose to his feet and pitched from the buckboard to the road.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. To what part of the West would you go to find the greatest number of prehistoric cliff dwellings?

2. Several Spanish words meaning friend, partner, companion, side-kick, etc., are in common use in the Southwestern cattle country. Can you give one such term?

3. There are several Western slang terms a cowboy may apply to a man who is broke financially. Can you think of one of them?

4. Riding in the high mountains, a cowboy shot a white snowshoe rabbit. What season of the year was it?

5. Name at least two well known brands of Western cowboy boots.

6. Suppose, in a day's automobile drive or less, you are at one time or another in sight of these mountain ranges: Franklin, Organ, San Andres, White, Sacramento and Guadalupe—in the southern part of what Western state would you be traveling?

7. A beautiful waterfall called Little Niagara is to be seen in the Platt National Park, in what Western state?

8. Name the Western state bounded by Canada, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Montana.

9. Give two or more cowboy slang terms meaning "death" or "to die?"

10. What is a boar's nest in cowboy lingo?

——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 108. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

FRONTIER WOMAN

By Ennen Reaves Hall

DOCTOR Jarvis Henry, called Doc so often he'd almost forgotten his own name, looked at the grim faces of the school trustees and knew it was no use. There was nothing he could do to help Nita Wells. Anything he said in her favor just strengthened the case against her. Nevertheless he had to try.

"Miss Wells is a good teacher," he said warmly. "She handles the children well, and they like her. And I think she'd die for them."

"And that makes it all the worse," a fat man said piously. "With her influence over our kids she can do them a lot of harm. Better no teacher, I say, than the wrong one. If Doc had any kids of his own he'd understand that."

That seemed to leave Doc out of the discussion, but he wasn't ready to admit defeat. He had come to the meeting to help out a friend, and he was going through with it.

"You're judging a woman on hearsay," he said hotly. "You don't really know a thing against Miss Wells."

"Reckon we know enough," Gabe Fletcher said firmly. "When a young woman's seen going into a man's cabin late at night and leaving it early in the morning, we don't need any more proof that she ain't what she ought to be. And I say it's high time we let folks know we ain't standing for no such goings on from our school teacher."

"Reckon Doc could see that if she hadn't pulled the wool over his eyes too," a man said slyly.

Inwardly raging, Doc had to give up. When the meeting was over Nita Wells had been voted out as teacher of the Pleasant Valley school, and Gabe Fletcher's niece, Corinda Miles, had been voted in. Gabe volunteered to accompany his niece to the schoolhouse the next morning and tell Miss Wells she could go home and stay. Doc hurried out, holding fast to the remnants of his temper.

Corinda Miles, he thought scornfully, would make a hell of a school teacher. All dimples and big blue eyes and gold yellow hair. Why, the girl was too damned pretty to be good for anything! She'd only recently come to the Territory from the East, and Doc Henry would have wagered his saddle that she wouldn't stay long. He knew her kind—pretty to look at but absolutely useless. And Gabe Fletcher, damn, his greasy hide, had put this dirty trick over!

Doc was in the saddle when Gabe yelled after him. "Say, Doc, I almost forgot my old woman wants you to ride over and look at our Eddie. He stayed home sick today, and he's all broke out with something or other."

Doc nodded. "All right."

But he didn't start off in the direction of the Fletcher place. He had promised Nita Wells to visit a sick Indian child she was worried about, and he decided to go there first. Let Gabe Fletcher and his kid's hives wait.

Jogging slowly along, he couldn't get Nita Wells out of his mind. What a blow this was going to be to her! All too well Doc knew that small teacher's salary was all the girl had with which to buy food for herself and sister and brother while proving up on the homestead she held for them.

THE FRONTIER demanded women of courage, and so did Doc, who was too sure he'd never find one he'd want to take for his wife

Nita Wells was a spunky young woman, Doc knew. But not a very discreet one or she wouldn't have let herself be seen going into Bob Clay's cabin. Doc would have thought she'd have been smarter than that.

DOC SWORE again to himself and wished to hell he could throw the truth about Nita and Bob into the faces of the self-righteous school committee. But he couldn't do it. A doctor often knew a lot more than he could tell, and this was one of those times. But it burned him up to see Nita lose her job, and maybe even her homestead, to a doll-faced girl who didn't need the money.

Gabe Fletcher's niece couldn't need a job. Gabe had the richest and best stocked farm for miles around and a house that looked like a mansion when compared with his neighbors' log cabins and sod shanties. And Corinda Miles wore expensive clothes that were the envy of the other Pleasant Valley women. Likely enough she only wanted to teach school to get money for more fine new dresses. Most women were selfish like that, and once more Doc felt gratitude that none of them had roped him in.

At the Indian's cabin Doc took one look at the fever-mottled face of the child and knew he was looking at trouble. There was little doubt the child was dying of the dreaded smallpox that was ravaging the Indian Territory tribes. He felt a sickness inside him at the thought of what such an epidemic could do in Pleasant Valley.

It was sundown when he left the Indian's cabin and dark by the time he had reached his boarding house, changed clothes and used disinfectant on his hands. Even so, he climbed wearily back into the saddle and rode toward the Fletcher place. Gabe's boy might only have a case of hives, and again he might not.

Gabe met him at the door, scowling. "Been waiting for you, Doc." It was plain that Gabe Fletcher didn't think he should be kept waiting on anyone.

Doc explained, tersely. "Stopped by Indian Joe's place to see his child. Found the kid dying. With"—he paused ominously—"smallpox."

"Smallpox!" Fletcher's face turned a pasty white. "And he was at school last week! Good God, Doc, what will we do?"

"Vaccinate every school kid in the morning. I've already vaccinated Joe's family and warned them to stay away from everyone, and I'll keep a close watch on them. The kid got it from some visiting kin that was here a couple of weeks ago from the Indian Territory. I heard it's bad over there, so I laid in a supply of vaccine."

"Vaccinate my family tonight," Fletcher ordered. "And hurry and look at my boy. He's broke out all over."

Doc didn't like being ordered about like that. He was used to giving orders. And he didn't like Gabe Fletcher anyway, all puffed up with self-importance. He brushed past the shaking man into the room.

"Sorry," Doc said firmly, "I haven't the vaccine with me. Besides, I likely don't have any more than enough to take care of the kids. They come first, Fletcher, and the rest of you wait."

FLETCHER groaned, his fears mounting. "Eddie's got it. I know he's got it," he moaned. "Doc, can't you do something?"

Doc was bending over the sick boy, seeing at once that this wasn't serious. Probably nothing more than the hives he had at first suspected. He was just on the point of saying so when he heard a crisply cool voice taking the words out of his mouth.

"Nonsense, Uncle Gabe. Eddie isn't that sick. Now don't get yourself all worked up over nothing."

"Over nothing?" Gabe fairly yelled. "You call smallpox nothing? Why, if Eddie's got even a light case folks won't come near us for weeks. Ma can't sell her butter and eggs and—"

"But Eddie hasn't got it," she insisted.

Doc straightened up slowly, finding his eyes on a level with two of the bluest he had ever seen, widely spaced and vivid, looking like bright jewels set in an appealing, heart-shaped face. Only the effect left Doc cold. He was thoroughly prepared to dislike Corinda Miles. And Doc was wrestling with a temptation too big to resist. He was seeing a chance to help Nita Wells, and he suddenly resolved to take it.

"Maybe you made a mistake, sending for me, Gabe," he said heavily. "Miss Miles seems to know more about the boy than I do. At least she sounds much more sure than I feel."

Gabe pressed forward. "You mean Eddie's really got it? My God, Doc, you going to quarantine us?"

"Certainly," Doc said sharply. "At least until we're sure. You know what an epidemic would mean, Fletcher, and folks would never forgive you if you started one. You'll have to keep all your family at home for at least three weeks."

"Ridiculous!" Corinda Miles snapped, and Doc almost winced under the blaze of the blue eyes. "Eddie hasn't any more smallpox than I have. Why, he hasn't hardly any fever, and there's no sign of eruptions at all. Uncle Gabe, can't you see what this—this horse doctor is trying to do? He thinks he'll keep me away from the school in the morning."

The term "horse doctor" was all that was needed to make Doc boil over. Because doctors were scarce in the Territory and animals valuable, he was often called upon to render aid to farmers with sick horses and cows. Corinda Miles had hit a sore spot.

"You will stay away from that schoolhouse until I say you can go," he said firmly. "That's orders, and you know better than to disobey them, Miss Miles. The other trustees have children, also, and they won't stand for your exposing them to danger."

"Doc's right, Corinda," Gabe said resignedly. "We all agreed to leave such matters in Doc's hands, same as if he was the law."

"I didn't agree," Corinda snapped. "It's just a scheme to keep that job a little longer for Nita Wells, and I won't stand for it."

"I don't see what you can do about it." Doc was almost smirking, he felt so good at having bested Corinda Miles. "And I might remind you that I didn't make Eddie sick."

"But green apples did," Corinda said scornfully. "And if you were a real doctor, you'd know it."

She flounced out of the room and Doc left, grinning happily. In the morning he'd see the other trustees, and it was a cinch Corinda Miles wouldn't start her school teaching career just yet. Even after Eddie was well, which he doubtless would be in a few days, they'd be afraid to have the girl in the schoolroom. Since there were no other qualified teachers, that meant Nita could go on with the job for a few more weeks at least.

BY THEN Doc figured he could find some other way to help Nita. Likely enough Corinda Miles would have enough of Frontier life by then and be ready to leave. Doc's first idea had been to scare her off with the smallpox talk, but he had to admit now that the gal wasn't easily scared. And she was smart, though not as smart as she thought she was. Not smart enough to cope with Doc Henry, anyway.

Because Doc had to answer a sick call at daybreak the next morning, it was midmorning before he rode up to the schoolhouse, dread in his heart for what he had to do. Though actually vaccination amounted to little, he knew the children would be frightened and resentful and hard to manage. Nita would help, of course, and he breathed a prayer of gratitude that Nita would be there. As soon as he was through he'd go see the trustees.

In the doorway he stopped, staring in dismay. Where Nita's dark head should have been there was a blob of pale gold, under which two vivid blue eyes stared back at him defiantly. Near by sat Eddie Fletcher, looking much as usual except a little pale.

For a moment Doc didn't know what to say. Then he tried bluffing. "Miss Miles, I demand that you and Eddie go home. I gave you strict orders."

"I know you did, Doctor," she interrupted sweetly, too sweetly. "But that was when you thought Eddie had smallpox. After I cured his breaking out with a big dose of Epsom Salts, I knew you wouldn't want folks to know what a terrible mistake you had made. So I hurried right over this morning and sent Miss Wells home."

She lowered her voice then, and all the sweetness was gone from it. "Better drop it, Doc, or you'll be the laughing stock of the valley. Couldn't tell hives from small-

pox! Why, men will even be afraid to have you doctor their horses when they hear about it. Or do you want it known that you deliberately made a wrong diagnosis to help your sweetheart keep her job?"

Doc's hand itched to slap her, but she had him by the short hair he knew it. Anger was boiling in him, but he managed to control it.

"There was a certain risk," he said defensively. "And Miss Wells is no more than a good friend who needs her job badly, and you've no right to imply anything else."

Her eyebrows went up infuriatingly. "You must be in love with her to champion her so vehemently. A disease others seem to suffer from, so maybe you should quarantine Nita Wells, Doctor. Are you sure love isn't contagious?"

Doc moved impulsively toward her, hard put to control his rage. "If we were alone I'd slap your face for that! So help me I would!"

"Stay after school and I'll arrange it," she mocked. "I double dare you to try it, Dr. Henry."

HIS BROWN eyes battled fiercely with her blue ones. But it was Doc who looked away first, and that didn't help his mental discomfort. Doc wasn't used to taking beatings such as this girl handed him.

"I'll be here," he said tightly, and set about laying out vaccine and hypodermic needles. Though seething inside, he told the children calmly enough what he had to do. "You mustn't be frightened," he added, noting the dawn of terror in a dozen childish faces.

They weren't listening to his reassurances. They began crying, their wails rising in tempo as their infectious fear spread. When Doc reached for the arm of the nearest boy, the child broke away from him with a shrill cry and made for the door. A dozen more left their seats and ran after him. It looked like full retreat, and Doc felt a helplessness such as he had never known before.

But the door slammed in the very face of the boyish leader. Corinda Miles stood with back against it, still smiling.

"Really, children"—her voice was quiet and reassuring, but carried above the uproar—"we shouldn't treat Dr. Henry like this if he wants to play games with us. Don't you think it will be more fun to join hands and play Ring-Around-the-Rosy? The last one that squats will be the first to be vaccinated. I've always wanted to be vaccinated!"

Her enthusiasm sounded genuine enough to hypnotize the children. Another moment and they were marching around the room, chanting their sing-song. At a signal they dropped to their haunches and Doc, at least, wasn't surprised that the new teacher proved to be the slow one. While the others clapped delightedly she went up to Doc, rolling up her long sleeve and exposing a rounded, white forearm.

"Let me have it, Doc," she laughed. "But be sure you don't tickle."

That brought another gale of laughter, and Doc knew the battle was won. A grudging admiration for Corinda Miles rose in him and was promptly suppressed. Or so he thought.

But when he took her soft arm between his hands a sensation he couldn't explain seized him. Touching a woman's arm wasn't a new experience for Doc and shouldn't have affected him at all. Especially one he disliked as thoroughly as he did this one. But he felt as if he'd just touched an electric wire, and it was all he could do not to jab the needle to the bone.

Corinda seemed to be enjoying herself. She laughed merrily and told the others, "That hurt Doc a lot more than it did me. Now, who's next? Last one will be a yellow dog."

BROWN face stoic, an Indian boy stepped forward. It went fast after that, and pretty soon Doc closed his medicine bag and left. Corinda had already resumed classes and apparently didn't see him leave.

School had dismissed and Corinda was alone when Doc rode up to the school house that afternon. He stood in the door, fumbling with his hat awkwardly, and feeling very foolish as he met the gaze of her calm blue eyes.

"I just wanted to thank you for your help this morning," he finally managed to say. "I couldn't have handled those kids alone."

"Oh," she said, and little imps began dancing in the blue eyes, "I thought you had come back to slap me. You were going to, remember?"

Until that second Doc had actually forgotten. Now anger stirred in him again because it was easy to see she was laughing at him.

"I should," he said heavily. "You're a selfish, spoiled young woman that needs slapping. Bringing Eddie to school against my orders, not caring whether or not you endangered the whole community, just because you want the job of a girl who hasn't any other way of supporting her brother and sister."

"Bosh," she said, and laughed. "Nobody knows better than you, Doc, that I didn't endanger anybody when I brought Eddie to school. And as far as Nita Wells is concerned, why don't either you or Bob Clay marry her and support those poor orphans? Or can't she make up her mind to choose between you?"

The mockery in her voice infuriated Doc. Grabbing her arm, he swung her roughly about close against him.

"I will slap you for that," he raged. "So help me, I will!"

But he didn't. He pulled her closer and kissed her instead, long and hard and hungrily. He didn't know why he did. He certainly hadn't meant to. He had just suddenly felt he was drowning in the blue depths of her eyes, and nothing on earth could save him except the feel of her warm lips under his. Warm and sweet and returning his kiss—or was Doc just dreaming that?

He must have been, for when he released Corinda her eyes were blazing blue fire.

"I never bargained to take on Nita Wells' lovers along with her job," she said angrily. "After this kindly stay away from my school, Doctor, except professionally."

Stay away? Wild horses couldn't drag him back there, Doc vowed as he rode away in complete humiliation. Yet for the life of him he couldn't forget the softness of Corinda's arm, or the warmth of her lips under his. Nor yet the mockery in her blue eyes. . . . She was a hellcat on wheels, this Corinda Miles, and best forgotten quickly, he told himself. But doctors don't always take their own orders. Doc slept badly for three nights.

The third day he went back to the schoolhouse, though that wasn't anything he had planned, either. It was the storekeeper who sent him riding off like the wind, fear riding with him.

"Say, Doc," that individual said when

RIVAL LONGHORNS

A NEW TYPE of longhorn has been flourishing in the West for the past 15 years—the Afrikander, first imported from its native South African range in 1932 by the many-acred King Ranch in Texas. Afrikanders are not as stringy as our old longhorns, are dewlapped and humped something like the Brahma, and have sleepy-looking eyes. Their horns are thin and point downward at the tips in contrast to the optimistic, heavenward slant of the familiar longhorn.

On the 777 Ranch of south Texas, where they are now being bred and crossbred for experimental purposes, they are proving to be long-lived and extremely fertile.

In South Africa it is believed the Afrikander, when slaughtered, dresses out to more and better beef than other breeds. The 777 hopes, with its crossbreeding of the animals with Herefords, Brahmas and Santa Gertrudis cattle, to reproduce these fine beef qualities in American stock.

Doc stopped by to ask about mail, "didja see that Injun, Yellowhorse? He was in here a little while ago, packing a gun and pretty well tanked up on likker. Said he was going to kill you for making his kid sick, that you scratched him with a devil's needle and made him sick. Reckon the kid's vaccination took real hard. I tried to talk Yellowhorse out of his mad fit but he wouldn't listen and stormed out." . .

"Which way did he go?" Doc knew what a bad combination liquor in an Indian's belly and a gun in his hand made. Add to that a superstitious belief that his child had been harmed and you had bad medicine.

"He rode off toward the schoolhouse," the storekeeper told him. "Had the idee you'd be there, though I told him—"

DOC WAS out of the door like a flash, almost running down Nita Wells, who was coming in. Without stopping for explanations Doc leaped into his saddle and started for the schoolhouse, a quarter of a mile away. If that drunken Indian knew that Corinda Miles had helped him vaccinate those kids, no telling what he might do. Nita the Indians knew, and trusted. But Corinda was different. . . .

The Indian's pony stood with drooping head and heaving flanks in front of the schoolhouse. From inside sounded small, shrill voices clamoring in fright as Doc jumped from his horse and ran for the door. There he stopped, petrified into immobility at sight of the tableau in the room.

Corinda stood defiantly facing the threatening gun barrel of Yellowhorse. Above the cries of the scared kids her voice rose steady and strong and unafraid.

"Let the children leave, Yellowhorse. They had nothing to do with it."

"Papooses stay," Yellowhorse grunted. "Then nobody can shoot Yellowhorse before he kills white teacher for helping Doc put the sickness into papoose's arm."

Doc moved toward them cautiously, terribly afraid that his least move might set off that hair trigger under the Indian's finger. "Let's go outside and settle this, Yellowhorse," Doc said. If only I had a gun, he was thinking desperately. But what could a man do with only his bare hands against that cocked, high-powered rifle in the nervous hands of a drunken Indian?

Yellowhorse's eyes gleamed with satisfaction at sight of Doc. "Kill both of you in here." He announced firmly. "Doc stand over here so Yellowhorse can shoot both of you without hitting papooses."

He motioned to a stand just beyond Corinda, and Doc moved there, helpless to refuse him, with that gun threatening Corinda as it was. There was nothing he could do but talk this crazy Indian out of this killing idea he had.

There was the sound of excited voices, and through the open door they saw men arriving, led by Nita Wells. Yellowhorse motioned with the gun.

"Bar door," he ordered. "Tell men to go away or Yellowhorse kill all their papooses."

He meant it. Any second that gun would start talking its deadly language, and Pleasant Valley would never again be the happy community it had been. Doc knew he couldn't risk that. He shut and barred the door and raised his voice to be heard outside.

"It's all right, folks! But don't try to come in or he'll shoot."

The low voices of the men outside reached them, but not their words. Without seeing them Doc knew what they were doing. Standing helplessly, as he was doing, trying to think of some way to outflank Yellowhorse, afraid most of all for the trapped children. Just as Doc was afraid for them. . . .

For it was there in the reddened eyes of the crazed man, the lust to kill. It would scarcely matter now whom he killed, nor how many. It would be a massacre before it was over, and what happened to Doc in trying to stop it wasn't the important thing. For of course he had to stop it some way. Slowly, cautiously, he moved a hand to rest it on the trembling arm of Corinda, ready to shove her away when he attacked.

STANDING as he was, Doc was facing a small window behind the Indian. Too small and too high for a man to squeeze through without attracting deadly gunfire.

But Doc's heart lurched as a face suddenly appeared there. A small, dark head, followed by the slender arms and shoulders of Nita Wells. Nita was small, and she was going to try to get through that window and get the drop on Yellowhorse. She might even do it if she could move fast enough and quietly enough.

To cover for Nita and gain precious seconds of time, Doc started talking to Yellowhorse. He hardly knew what he was saying and the Indian wasn't listening, but the children were and it was important that they not notice Nita and give her presence away.

Yellowhorse moved the gun impatiently. "White Doc talk too much," he muttered. "All white men talk too much, lie to Indians. Now Yellowhorse kill all of them."

The gun barrel moved, and Doc thought, with a lurch of his heart, now it's coming. Nita can't make it. Spunky little Nita, squirming and wriggling silently through that window, coming to the rescue of her beloved pupils! Not, he knew instinctively, to save himself or Corinda Miles.

The Indian's triggerfinger tightened on the gun just as Nita got both feet through the window. Doc's heart sank as he saw she was empty-handed. With not even a gun, what could she do?

A foot ruler lay on the desk of a boy, and Nita snatched it up. Stepping up softly behind Yellowhorse, she jabbed it into his back and crisply ordered him to drop his gun.

Grunting in surprise, the Indian half turned his head. It was the instant Doc had been waiting for, and he moved like greased lightning. One hand shoved Corinda aside, the other went for Yellowhorse's jaw with all the force of a mule's kick.

If Doc had been closer to the Indian the fight would have been over before it began. But at that distance Doc did no more than rock his head and throw him off balance. The Indian's gun exploded almost in Doc's face, but the bullet sped harmlessly into the wall. Doc's blow had almost carried him off his feet, and he knew with a terrible certainty that Yellowhorse would have time to fire again before he could regain his balance.

But Nita, dropping the ruler, had picked up a book and now hit the Indian squarely in the face with it. He swung the gun toward her, and then Corinda let him have another speller behind the ear. By then Doc had grabbed the gun and, wresting it from Yellowhorse's hand, whacked him soundly over the head and the fight was over.

At the sound of the shot men began pounding on the door, and Doc went to let them in. At once Nita became their heroine, and Doc stod grinning, listening to their extravagant praises of her act. Finally he added his own simple eulogy:

"I told the school committee she'd die for these kids any time. And today she almost did."

CORINDA said suddenly. "And she can have the school back whenever she wants it. I've had enough, and I'm quitting."

Doc looked at her in surprise and disappointment. He'd forgotten that he'd predicted this very thing of her. After the way she'd stood up to him and to Yellowhorse, he'd put her down as being plenty spunky. Now she was quitting after the first sign of trouble. Of course that meant the job would go back to Nita. Grateful parents would see to that, after what she had done today. And Doc would figure out some way to spike all that scandal about her and Bob Clay.

It was what Doc had wanted all right, and he should have been glad. But he was more conscious of an odd disappointment in Corinda. She'd been so wonderful with the kids when he'd vaccinated them. And she knew all about the symptoms of smallpox, as well as what green apples could do to a small boy. And she could face a crazed Indian with a gun in his hand and calmly plead for the children in her care. But after it was over she was ready to turn tail and run! That was a pretty girl for you, and Doc didn't like quitters. Nobody knew better than he that Frontier women needed guts, and Corinda evidently didn't have her share.

Busy with his thoughts, Doc was almost surprised to find that he and Corinda were alone. The others were all gone, and she

was busily gathering up her personal belongings. Doc stood looking down at her, feeling his heart doing gymnastics inside his shirt.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded abruptly. "Why did you let all of them think a drunken Indian scared you clear away?"

"Maybe he did." She strapped some books together before adding, "And maybe I just got tired of having it thrown up to me that I selfishly took the job another woman needed worse than I. Anyway, I paid her back for what she did for us, so now we're even."

Doc understood then, and a surge of gladness went through him. Corinda had spunk, but she had a heart, too. She would help him solve Nita's problem.

"Listen, Corinda," he said softly. "I'm going to tell you something you must keep to yourself. Nita and Bob Clay are married, but they can't let people know about it until they prove up their homestead claims. The law lets only the head of a household file on a claim, you know, but Nita wants to keep hers for her kid brother and sister. And she has to have a job to support them and to help Bob, for he's tubercular and can't work much. She was seen going into his cabin to take care of him when he was sick, and all that talk got started about her. If you'd be friends with her, you could help me convince folks she's on the level."

"Oh, Doc, I'm so glad you told me." There was a shine in the blue eyes now, like sunlight glinting on water. "And I'm glad I gave her back the job. I needed it, too, for since my father died I haven't anyone to help me except Uncle Gabe who plainly doesn't want to."

Doc's hand tightened on her arm. "What will you do now, Corinda?"

"Go somewhere else to find work, I guess. I think maybe I might make a good nurse. What do you think, Doc?"

There was a hint of mockery in her eyes again, and Doc grinned back at her. "Stay here," he said boldly. "You'd make a first class wife for a Territory doctor."

Corinda didn't seem to find anything wrong with the idea. She moved into his arms.

COWBOY MEETS MAD BUCK

Wild Life and the Cowboy

ROSCOE BANKS stumped out into the deer pasture to get his horse, though he knew better than to go into that pasture on foot. Five whitetail deer were penned up in the high-fenced enclosure, one of them a three-year-old buck.

But Roscoe wanted his own Sorrel-Top to ride to the New Year's Eve shindig at Lone Pine, N. M. Thinking of the good time he would have at the dance, Roscoe forgot about the buck. Striding lithely through the scrub piñon and jackpines, he whistled for Sorrel-Top.

There was the buck, directly in Roscoe's path! The young waddy stopped, picked up a stick and threw it at the deer. He missed, struck a bush with a swishing sound.

Suddenly the buck charged, horns lowered. Roscoe glanced around for a tree, but there wasn't one large enough handy. The buck was on him. Roscoe had bulldogged steers much bigger than this hundred-pound buck, so he reached down and grabbed the deer's antlers with both hands.

The buck gave a lunge, flipping his head upward and to one side. Roscoe was flung clear of the ground. He landed on his feet, still gripping the buck's antlers. By this time he was beginning to get scared. He couldn't turn loose and run. That would be suicide. All there was left to do was try to twist the deer's neck and get him down.

Clamping the antlers more firmly, Roscoe put on the pressure. The next thing he knew he was sailing through the air like a leaf. He hit the ground on his back, looked up into the face of the angry buck. A wild panic was creeping over Roscoe, until he recalled the range trick of lying still to escape an angry cow.

This didn't work with the buck. He pawed the prostrate puncher, pressed sharp antlers against his body.

"Help!" yelled the cowboy. "Hel-l-llp!!"

Something cut through the air, and suddenly the buck's body hurtled backwards. Flipping a glance after him, Roscoe saw the deer being dragged through the brush at the end of a rope. A fellow puncher had heard his yells.

Buck deer in the wild are not apt to attack human beings; but when caged up, they become dangerous and treacherous. They have no fear. No man can match strength with them at any time. This particular buck would probably not likely have attacked Roscoe had not the mating season been on. All bucks are in a fighting mood then.

The gate to the high-fenced pasture was left open after that, so the deer could escape into open country. Roscoe swore that come hunting season he was going after that buck. I don't think he ever did. ——*Jess Taylor*

Breed of the Border

By L. Ernenwein

His fame as a marksman made outlaws give him a wide berth

LAST of the Old West peace officers, the newspapers called him. They proclaimed his dauntless courage and said he was a sixgun specialist famous for fast and accurate shooting. But Colonel Jeff Milton, whose colorful career included a gun guard job on the *Soviet Ark*, seldom mentioned shooting scrapes nor his rôle as first-aid man to backtrail unfortunates.

Big in stature, stamina and courage, Jeff Milton possessed a tenacious determination to get his man, no matter how dangerous or difficult the getting might be. On one memorable occasion three bandits held up a train at Belen, New Mexico, and unwittingly launched one of the epic chases in Frontier history. Evading the train robbers' ambush traps and solving their tricks to throw him off the scent, Milton trailed the trio across deserts, over mountains and through canyons. The marathon ended at Eagle Creek, near Clifton, Arizona, and its outcome is best described by Milton's message to the express company: "Send two coffins and one doctor."

Jeff Milton was the kind of man who didn't have to talk big, for his stature was measured by his deeds

The long list of Colonel Milton's law enforcement jobs is especially impressive be-

cause it was built during the turbulent era when a badge-toter's survival depended upon the speed and accuracy of his right hand.

Born in Florida, Nov. 7, 1861, while his father was Civil War governor of the state, Jeff Milton went West as a boy. After winning his spurs as a cowpuncher he joined the Texas Rangers in 1880 at the age of 19 and subsequently established a reputation for marksmanship that became a Southwest tradition. Such notorious desperadoes as Bronco Bill Waters, Three Fingered Jack, Red Pipkins and Bill Johnson played losing parts in dramatic episodes of that gunsmoke tradition.

Milton served in the Rangers with men like Charlie Robinson, Al Coffee and Archie McCoy, the fearless breed whose self-reliance and daring in the face of overwhelming odds spawned the Texas declaration that "a ranger would charge hell with a bucket of water."

Unlike many of the shooting badge-toters who at times were outlaws themselves, Jeff Milton never deviated from his strict allegiance to law and order. Although he expressed the opinion that the dividing line between honesty and crookedness was often barely discernible in those rough-and-tumble times, Milton bore a deep-rooted contempt for the braggart badman and never missed an opportunity to give that type of criminal his needings. When a jury at Silver City returned a not guilty verdict on five desperadoes Milton had brought in, he re-arrested them at the court house door.

"They were the hardest-looking bunch of unhung scoundrels I ever saw," Milton said, explaining his unusual action. "Judge Parker, who presided at the trial, gave that jury a piece of his mind and said he'd never hold U. S. court in Silver City again as long as he lived. He took the court down to Las Cruces where Pat Garrett (Billy the Kid's nemesis) was sheriff, and we convicted all five of them."

IN 1886 Milton hired out as special officer for the Cattlemen's Association, rode cold trails until they became hot, and made cattle rustling an unpopular profession in his territory.

Colonel Jeff D. Milton

Never a talkative man nor one to brag of his exploits, Milton maintained a rather disdainful attitude toward the toughs of wild and woolly fame. Questioned regarding notorious Tombstone outlaws, he said: "Most of them have been painted a lot worse than they were." This, mind you, from the man whose left arm was riddled by slugs during a gun battle in which he killed Three Fingered Jack, one of the Southwest's most daring and dangerous outlaws.

That was while Milton was guarding a shipment of gold for Wells Fargo on the Guaymas to Benson run. The train had just pulled into the station at Fairbank, Arizona. Milton stood in the express car doorway when a masked bandit snarled: "Hold up your hands!" and punctuated the command with a bullet which snatched the hat from Milton's head.

Instead of surrendering, Milton dodged, tossed the express safe key into a far corner of the car and proceeded to shoot it out with the bandits, waging a terrific battle until he finally fainted from loss of blood.

In describing his narrow escape, Milton explained: "It happened that I fell between two big trunks, and I guess that saved me from being killed. The robbers shot into the car from all sides to be sure I was dead before they tried to enter."

The holdup gang failed to find the key, and having no dynamite, couldn't open the express safe. Final score: Three Fingered Jack dead, three other bandits captured, and Jeff Milton's left arm crippled.

Although his fame was earned with a gun, there was another and less publicized trait which endeared Milton to backtrail unfortunates—his habit of toting a pair of forceps in his saddlebags with which he pulled aching teeth, and his ability to administer first-aid treatment in a country where dentists and doctors were practically non-existent. This good-samaritan side of his nature won Milton loyal friends among Indians, Mexicans and line camp cowboys.

Milton's long beat was from Nogales to Yuma, and he rode alone. He made friends with the Papago Indians and liked them. "They're a fine people," he told friends. "At first I rode the whole Line, but later I got a light wagon fixed up with a tank for water, and led my saddle horse. Many a time I've driven up to a Papago house and without saying a word unloaded three or four months' supplies. Perhaps I'd be gone a month or more, but never a thing would be missing when I returned."

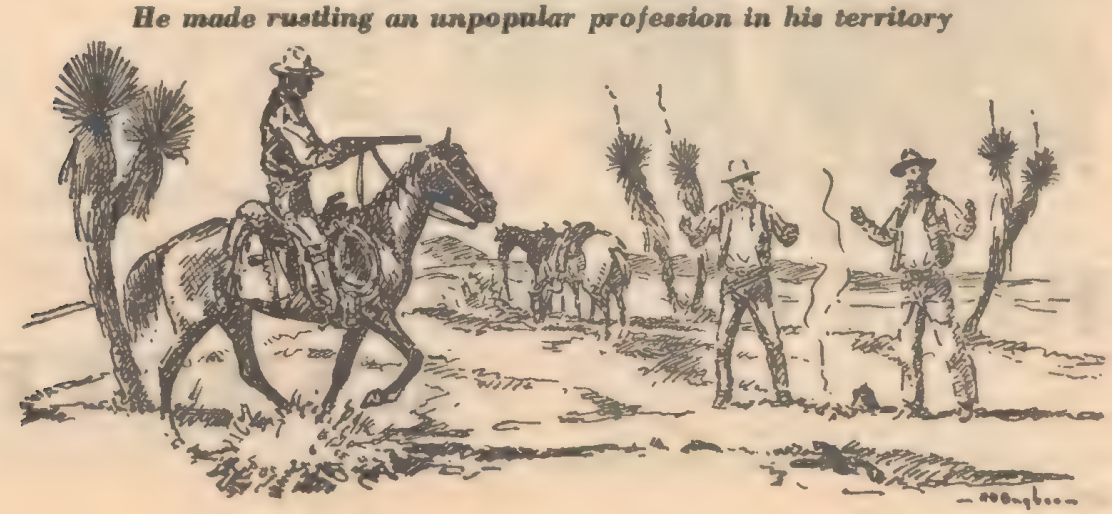
In 1919, while serving in the U. S. Customs, Milton was ordered to New York on a mysterious mission which proved to be about the strangest assignment a Western lawman ever covered. He was told to prepare for a long trip, and to bring heavy clothing with him. Upon reporting to his superiors, Milton was astonished to learn that he had been selected for a fantastic rôle—gun guard on the *Soviet Ark*, a ship which was to carry Emma Goldman and some 200 other agitators who were being deported to Russia. Because trouble was feared if the details became known, Milton was sworn to secrecy. He abided by his instructions with such fidelity that his bride of six months didn't know where he'd gone until the ship was well out to sea.

Milton's talent for brevity and understatement have kept many details of his exciting career from the record, for he could dismiss an episode by saying: "We quieted Colorado City," even though the quieting called for considerable gunplay.

In 1936 the U. S. Customs Service honored Milton by naming its newest patrol cutter the *Jeff D. Milton*. A year later he was commissioned life-time military aide to the governor of Arizona with the rank of colonel.

Jeff Milton was 85 when he died at Tucson, May 7, 1947. Although newspapers eulogized him throughout the Southwest he had served so faithfully, Milton's finest tribute came from a frosty-haired cowman who said: "Plenty of them old-time badge-toters talked big, but Jeff didn't need to talk. He *was* big!"

He made rustling an unpopular profession in his territory



Nita recognized the engineer in charge

RELUCTANT BANDIT

By Dorothy L. Bonar

SHE RODE AN OUTLAW'S horse and followed outlaw orders . . . yet it hurt her deeply when Stan Gregory called her a bandit

NITA WALDRON, daughter of a Spanish mother and an American outlaw father, hid her roan mount in a scrub oak thicket and crawled to the crest of a ridge. Lying flat on her stomach, she peered cautiously down on a railroad construction gang at work on a bridge over the deep, dry bed of a stream.

For two weeks they had made progress, despite all the obstacles Nick Waldron had thrown in their path. Now the shining span was almost completed.

"Tomorrow night," murmured Nita, and resolutely dismissed a mental picture of the mass of twisted wreckage it was then to become.

Why should she care anyway, since there was nothing she could do about it? Nick had put it to her straight a month ago, when he'd visited the Sonora convent school where she'd been since the age of ten.

"Your mother's dyin', *chica,*" he'd said bluntly. "Something wrong with her blood, a Kansas City doc claims. She might last a few more months. I know she agreed to let you go to her folks in Mexico City after you finished school here. But I think you ought to have a say in that. She gave you up years ago, believin' it was best for you. Now I'm hopin' that comin' back to her for the little time she's got left will mean more to you than becomin' a grand lady. How about it?"

Nita could give only one answer, of course.

He'd added, "I aim to bring her back to Mexico, give her everything she wants. But that'll take money, so first I've got to finish up a job I hired out to do. While I'm on it you'll have to put up with things—do just as I say!"

There it was. Whatever his feelings, Nick Waldron was outwardly a hard man—harder now since his confederate for years, Pink Grogan, had just lost his life in this, their latest and last joint enterprise. Nita knew she must bend to his will or desert her dying mother. That was why she was doing a Grogan chore now—checking on the progress of the bridge construction while Nick made a trip to the headquarters of the Benston Company Stage and Freight Line for a new supply of dynamite.

After a brief observation Nita wriggled backward. Safely below the skyline she arose, and froze to the sound of horse's hoofs coming up the draw behind her.

It could not be Nick. He would not be back until tonight. Swiftly Nita darted to her mount, drew him farther back into the thicket and put her hand to his nose. While not the best strategy, it was her only chance. White teeth pinching a crimson lower lip, she watched a horseman move into sight.

He was young, with a smooth-shaven, tanned face and light hair beneath a black hat. He wore a blue shirt, whipcord trousers and laced boots. Having had him pointed out to her once, Nita recognized Stan Gregory, the engineer in charge. He had the carcass of a deer tied behind his saddle. And he was bending over, studying the ground as his horse moved slowly along.

WITH comprehension Nita's heart commenced to pound. On his return from a hunting jaunt into the hills, he had run across the fresh tracks

of her roan and followed them in. In short order they'd lead him to her hiding place. And how could she explain her presence, without a ranch or town closer than fifty miles?

Panic overcame Nita. Swiftly she mounted and sent the roan crashing through the thicket. If she could cut into the trail behind Gregory, she might be able to outrun him, and eventually give him the slip.

Leafy branches slapped her face. She lost her hat. Then a snag caught viciously at her right knee, almost tearing her from the saddle. Clutching the horn, she managed to hold her seat. But though the roan turned into the trail in the right direction, she was incapable of urging him at once to full speed.

Dimly she became aware of thundering hoofs behind. Then a rider flashed abreast, reaching for the roan's bridle. Something red hot seemed to explode in Nita's injured knee as the animal plunged to a halt. However, pride and desperate courage enabled her to fight off faintness. Lifting her chin, she regarded her captor haughtily.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed blankly. "A Spanish beauty loose in these hills! Where on earth . . . " Then he seemed to recall something. His face hardened. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

Nita shrugged. *"No sabe Inglés."*

If he could not speak Spanish, it would be stalemate— Before he could get one of his Mexican laborers to act as interpreter, she might find an opportunity to escape.

The young engineer frowned thoughtfully. Appropriating her bridle reins, he headed for the site of construction leading her mount. Half turned in his saddle he watched her, evidently unaware that Nita would not be able to quit her mount and run into the brush, even should the chance be given her. With that knee she'd have to escape mounted or not at all.

Her heart sank a further notch when they rode up to the bridge. It swarmed with workmen already commencing to lay track across it. In short order all activity ceased. Finding herself the target of all eyes, Nita kept her own lowered while Gregory inquired the whereabouts of someone named Ferguson.

"He took Mike McGarrity back to camp," spoke up a rich Irish voice. "Passed out on his feet, Mike did."

"I told that young mick he wasn't fit to work yet," declared Gregory.

Turning, he bypassed a locomotive and string of flat cars, to lead Nita a course parallel with the newly laid tracks that formed a shining trail of steel as far as eye could see. Within a mile they came upon the construction camp tucked between two hills. Gregory rode straight to one of the smaller tents and dismounted.

"Ferguson!" he called.

The man who emerged was small, but his look and clothes were those of a plainsman. He flicked Nita a non-committal glance and said cryptically, "Young Mike's in a bad way, Boss. Pulled that wound open and lost a lot more blood."

NITA saw Stan Gregory's mouth become a tight line. "He's got to be loaded on a flat car then, and taken back to Carsonville," he said.

"I've already seen to that."

"Good. Then maybe you can help me get to the bottom of something new right now." Stan Gregory nodded towards Nita's mount. "Take a look at this roan's tracks, will you?"

Nita caught her breath as Ferguson sought clear hoofprints on a patch of bare ground. This was even worse than she had anticipated. She chilled as the older man gave out an exclamation.

"That bronc was rid by one of the sidewinders who blowed up that stretch of track last week!" he charged.

The engineer nodded grimly. "That's what I thought. But I wanted to be sure." Swiftly he explained his capture of Nita, adding, "She claims not to understand my lingo, and I can't talk hers. But you can. See what you can get out of her."

Ferguson's Spanish was fluent enough so that Nita could not pretend this time. She simply maintained a stubborn silence, since she could think of no plausible story which might persuade them to let her go.

At last Gregory broke in. "Wait a minute, Fergie. Explain the trouble we've been having—trainloads of supplies derailed—

stacks of ties set afire—workmen scared off their jobs. Tell her about Mike McGarrity getting shot while trying to keep two men from setting fire to the cook tent one night last week—how he killed one of them who turned out to be Pink Grogan, henchman of the notorious Nick Waldron."

"And why should I tell her all that?"

"Because maybe she isn't connected with the Waldron gang after all. Maybe she got hold of this roan in a perfectly innocent way and won't talk to us because she's scared."

"Son," drawled Ferguson, "them pretty Spanish eyes are affectin' your brain. Reckon that's what Waldron figgered on when he sent her out to do some spyin'. If she got caught, she'd have a good chance to play cute and get away."

"What do you mean?"

Ferguson flicked a sardonic glance at Nita's pale face. "I mean I'll lay you ten to one this gal is Nick Waldron's own brat. Leastwise she's a dead ringer for a *señorita* I seen him with in Mexico City twenty years ago. A man don't forget a face like that."

"But would Nick Waldron have his wife and family along on a job like this?"

"Wife?" Ferguson gave a derisive shrug. "Don't reckon him and his kind of woman would bother about huntin' up a *padre*, do you? She's probably in this as deep as he is."

It was too much. Nita thought of her sad-eyed, still lovely mother dying today in an outlaw's crude hide-out because years ago she had fallen in love with a handsome young bandit.

"That's not true!" she cried fiercely. "My mother's an angel. And she and Nick Waldron *did* hunt up a *padre!*" She stopped abruptly.

DISMAY swamped her as Ferguson's grin made it plain that he had cleverly tricked her into a betraying outburst. A twinge of fear shot through her at Stan Gregory's change of expression.

"So you don't savvy English!" he exclaimed tightly. "You little liar! Get off that horse and start talking—fast!"

With the words he hauled her roughly out of her saddle. Nita's feet hit the ground hard. A cry of pain escaped her as her right knee buckled beneath the jolt. She clutched at him, blackness swirling before her eyes. Then it closed in and blotted everything out.

When she came to, she was lying on a cot inside a tent. Her knee throbbed. It had been thickly bandaged and her boots removed. A blanket covered her to the waist. Fingering it, she turned her head and found Stan Gregory sitting on a box close by.

"I'm sorry I was so rough," he said. "I never dreamed you were hurt. And when I thought of Mike McGarrity and some of the others who've nearly lost their lives—maybe with your spying paving the way . . . ." His jaw clamped shut. His hands knotted into fists.

A wave of sympathy swept Nita. She could understand how it must hurt to have the fruit of days of labor wantonly destroyed, and to see workmen needlessly injured or terrorized. Suddenly she couldn't bear having him believe she was as bad as he must be thinking.

She said, "Just because I'm Nick Waldron's daughter doesn't mean I've been helping him against you. I haven't. The roan was Pink Grogan's horse. After Grogan was killed, Nick gave him to me. This is the first time I've ever ridden him."

The engineer looked skeptical. "In other words, you haven't done any spying against us? Then what were you in the vicinity of the bridge for? I expect Nick to try to blow it up. Does he want to be sure it's finished first, in order to destroy as much hard-to-get steel as possible?"

Nita remained silent. That was Nick's idea, of course, but she dared not admit it. Already she regretted her impulsive outburst.

GREGORY'S manner became pleading. "Look. The men backing this branch line railroad aren't financial giants. They're staking everything they've got—stretching credit to the limit to get the job done because they know how much it will mean to the people of Cascade Valley. It's only a selfish interest that's bucking us

—the Benston Stage and Freight Line in Carsonville. A railroad through here will put them out of business, so they're trying to keep it from being built. And they might succeed, unless we can prove they're behind all the deviltry we're fighting. You could help us do that."

Nita's heart thumped. She shook her head.

"Because Nick Waldron is your father? Suppose I could see that nothing happened to him—gave my word to get both of you safely back into Mexico?"

Nita's throat began to ache. Escape just for her and Nick wouldn't be enough. There had to be money, too, for her mother's sake. That meant finishing what had been started, no matter how she hated it.

"No," she said faintly.

The engineer's face fell. He began to fire questions at her. What about her mother? Was she in the country too, and what did she think of Nick's doings? What was he really planning next? Where was his hide-out? How many were there in his gang?

Nita continued to shake her head. Nick and Grogan had worked alone for years. But if they had been clever enough in their recent operations to create an impression of being more than a mere pair, she dared not reveal the truth now that Nick would be playing a solitary hand. Neither dared she give a hint as to her mother's physical condition, or breathe a word which might direct this man to the tiny, brush-hidden shack in which she lay.

"And you want me to believe your hands are clean of this dirty deal!" burst out the engineer at last in bitter tones. "Do I look like a fool? You're a bandit like the rest of them!"

Nita felt tears spring into her eyes. He looked harassed and earnest and angry. Jaw muscles twitched in lean, tanned cheeks. His mouth was again a tight line. But moments before as he'd pleaded with her, it had been generously wide with a sensitive curve to the lips. The blue of his eyes. . . .

She caught herself, amazed at the trend of her thoughts. Color flooded her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes, laying two fangs of long, black lashes upon exquisitely tinted skin. When she looked up again timidly a moment later, he was staring at her with an altogether different kind of intensity.

Somehow Nita wasn't surprised when he bent down and kissed her. It seemed as inevitable an act as was her own response, the sliding of her arms about his neck.

The next she knew he had torn them loose, shoved them away. "I guess I invited that, all right," he said with biting scorn. "Just the same, it's no go." Getting to his feet, he called out of the tent. "Fergie!"

When the older man appeared, he said, "I'm doubling the guard on the bridge tonight and aim to go down there a while myself. You keep an eye on our Spanish beauty, and look out for feminine wiles. She really knows how to ply 'em."

He went out. Nita stared at the tent flap that had dropped shut behind him, comprehension searing her. He didn't know she was fresh out of a convent school, that that had been her first kiss. He thought she was cheap and calculating, willing to use her beauty and physical allure to beguile and outwit him.

Glancing at Ferguson, Nita turned her head quickly and rolled over. It doesn't matter what he thinks of me, she told herself. All her thoughts must be directed toward escape and a return to the hide-out before her mother became frantic over her absence.

As the tent darkened with nightfall, Nita considered and discarded many ideas. Ferguson did not try to make her talk, for which she was grateful. Eventually he might grow drowsy and doze off, giving her a chance to slip away.

WHEN she heard him get up and light a lamp, she rolled over. This tent was plainly Stan Gregory's personal quarters. Besides the cot upon which she was lying, it contained a desk and a small trunk. On an inverted box stood a small mirror and a few masculine toilet articles. Nita's gaze picked out an extra pair of laced boots in a corner, then snapped shut as Ferguson returned to his seat near the doorway. She had no wish to encourage him to speak to her.

For a while she pretended sleep. Then

the abrupt sound of a familiar voice jolted her out of all thought of further pretense.

"Not a sound, friend, unless you want it to be your last!"

Nita sat bolt upright. "Nick!"

He had slipped into the tent so quickly and silently as to take Ferguson completely by surprise. Unshaven, covered with the grime of hard riding, he looked grim, exceedingly dangerous.

Ferguson did not argue with a leveled .45. Hands upraised, he turned his back obediently when ordered. Nick Waldron's hand went up, brought the reversed butt of his sixgun down hard.

A wave of revulsion swept Nita as the railroad man crumpled to the ground. "You could have tied him up—gagged him!" she protested.

"No time for that!" her father cut in brusquely. With a quick step he blew out the lamp before his shadow on canvas should attract outside attention. "Hell's goin' to pop around here pretty soon. I brought some Benston men back with me to clean up this railroad deal tonight. They're goin' to attack the camp and keep Gregory and his men busy while I dynamite the bridge."

Something inside Nita started to sink. The destruction of all Stan Gregory had achieved and fought for—the end for that shining trail of steel that meant so much to so many people. Dimly, through her thoughts, Nita heard Nick telling her to get a move on, that from here on it was up to her.

"I've turned you loose and arranged for the roan to be saddled and waitin' for you along the track towards the bridge," he said hurriedly. "Now—"

"You mean," broke in Nita, jolted back to alertness, "some of Gregory's men are bought off—secretly working with you?"

"Of course. How do you suppose I got in here without getting caught? How far would just Grogan and I have got without inside help? But I haven't time to stand here explainin'. Get a-movin'!"

"You'll have to help me," declared Nita, groping under the cot for her boots. "I hurt my right knee."

She heard him curse. Then he was beside her in the darkness, helping her to her feet. The left boot slipped on easily enough, but Nita groaned as the right one was forced on, and she leaned against him weakly.

"Afraid you'll have to—carry me!" she whispered.

HE DID not curse this time. But his rigidity conveyed an instant impression of thought and emotion battling inside him. Of a sudden he scooped her up, deposited her back on the cot.

"Sorry, *chica*, but I'll have to come after you another time," he said swiftly. "We could slip outa camp all right, if you could walk. But carryin' you—I might as well be packin' a lighted lantern. You set tight. They won't hurt a girl, and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"But Mother! She mustn't be alone so long!" Nita caught at him frantically as he started to withdraw.

Nick Waldron was silent for one long, nerve-shaking moment. Then he found and clasped both her hands in the darkness. His own were more like ice than living flesh. Yet Nita failed to attach any significance to this, for he began to speak at once and his words were as characteristically blunt as ever.

"Your mother's dead, *chica*. The doc said it could happen any time. Anyway, I found her like that when I got back from Carsonville a couple hours ago. She didn't look like she'd suffered at the last." For a moment his voice broke. Then it went on, smoothly controlled, completely devoid of feeling. "I didn't aim to break it to you like this, but—well, you can see why it don't matter about you stayin' here a little longer. I've got work to do right now, but I'll be back."

Nita heard him move across the tent. She knew when he slipped outside. Yet she had no power to call him back or try to stop him. A sort of numbness encased her, and as it began to ease away, she felt a wild desire to laugh crazily. The wife who for twenty years had sacrificed everything a woman's heart held dear in order to remain at his side was dead, her body scarcely cold. And he could go on about his lawless un-

dertaking as though nothing had happened.

A sudden, fierce gust of hate seized her. He had lied, then. It wasn't for her mother's sake that he wanted money. That story had just been a trick to exact obedience and loyalty from her while she took the task of caring for a sick woman off his hands. All along he had wanted the money from this job for himself.

"Well, you're not going to get it!" whispered Nita in a passion of grief and fury. "Not at the expense of a lot of other good, decent people like my mother."

Painfully Nita groped about until she located the desk. Near the lamp on its top she had seen a box of matches. Her fingers found it. In another moment light again filled the tent.

Her breath caught at sight of Ferguson's still figure. Was he dead? Hobbling, she reached his side, bent over him. A trickle of blood had stained his shirt collar, but his heartbeats were steady and strong. He had only been knocked out. Still she couldn't wait to revive him to carry a warning to Stan Gregory.

LIMPING, she pushed her way out of the tent and collided smack into the man uppermost in her thoughts—Stan Gregory. He grabbed her up, whisked her back inside. Before Nita could catch her breath sufficiently to speak he spied Ferguson's unconscious figure.

"So you caught him off guard, did you? And after I'd warned him you were a cute one, too! What'd you hit him with, anyway?"

Nita stared, stunned at the realization that he believed *she* had struck down the older man, and had been making an escape when he'd caught her.

"You—you don't understand!" she stammered. "I didn't hit him. I—"

But he deposited her back on the cot and cut in grimly, "If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up and lay still while I see how bad Fergie's hurt!"

Nita bit her lip. She couldn't blame him for the conclusion he'd drawn and for his brusqueness. She'd have thought the same thing in his position. In a moment he'd probably cool down, and then she'd be able to put the blame where it belonged, with Ferguson himself to back her story as soon as he returned to consciousness. Only she must warn him of Nick's plan at once.

"There's something I've got to tell you," she blurted. "I've changed my mind about not going against my father. I'll explain why later. Right now you. . . ."

A sudden rattle of gunfire cut her off. It was followed by a concentrated roar from a number of throats. Then pandemonium filled the night.

"So Waldron and his gang are going to try to wipe out the camp and get you back at the same time, are they?" commented the engineer.

Before Nita could open her mouth to correct this mistaken conclusion, he was at her side, tearing one of the blankets on the cot into strips. Struggling as he tied her hands behind her back, Nita tried to explain. But apparently his ears were deaf to all but the wild sounds outside—the frightened whinnying of the few horses in camp, the yelling of men and the tramp of running feet as they scurried to positions of defense, and the rapidly increasing volume of gunfire.

Her words unheeded, she found herself deposited on the ground. He tied a strip of blanket about the ankle of her uninjured leg and fastened the other end to one leg of the cot.

"That'll keep you from crawling off," he stated, "and it's safer from stray lead down there." His glance met hers, held.

"Stan," she begged. "Please. . . ."

He shook his head. "I can't waste any more time here. But I've got to tell you something. I don't even know your first name, but I'd give almost anything to have met you differently."

ABRUPTLY he halted, rose from her side. Snatching blankets off the cot, he stuffed one under Ferguson's head and rolled him warmly in the other.

"That's all I can do for him now," he said, and blew out the lamp.

Nita called after him as he left the tent. But the pandemonium of the night swallowed him up. He'd stay here and take charge of the fight to save the camp and the

precious supplies it contained, while from another direction an even greater catastrophe would strike the bridge!

Nita began to struggle to free her wrists. There was so little time. Sweat stood out on her forehead. She scarcely heard the frequent sound of lead ripping through canvas and whistling overhead. Expecting momentarily to hear the boom of a distant explosion, she struggled hopelessly for what seemed hours. In reality it was only a moment or two before Ferguson moaned and began to stir.

"Ferguson!" called Nita eagerly. "Can you hear me—understand what I'm saying? Ferguson!"

The reply was another moan. "Oh, my head!" At sound of further movement she could picture him sitting up, holding the aching head with both hands. Nita continued to plead with him, after a moment getting an intelligent response.

"You still here, girl? I thought Waldron . . . And what in thunder's goin' on outside?"

Nita told him swiftly. She told him the truth about herself and her mother, too, because she had somehow to win his trust and cooperation. She explained her change of heart towards the man who was her father.

"I stood by him while Mother was alive, tried to believe as she did that he wasn't all bad. But I know different now. People like him and the owners of the Benston Stage and Freight Line have to be stopped. I'm willing to help see that they are. I don't care what happens to me after tonight. But right now we've got to save the bridge. Gregory said materials were scarce —and so was money."

"That's right," admitted Ferguson. "And even if they weren't, with a big job like that to do over we'd never finish the line in time to hold our franchise. But shucks! Stan's got four men on guard down there!"

"Suppose they don't all remain at their posts, though, when they realize the camp's under attack? Suppose some of them decided they're needed more here? Nick could easily pick off one, or even two. He's like an Indian at stalking."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Untie me. Help me find Stan Gregory and warn him. Please, Ferguson! You've got to believe me, trust me!"

Briefly the sounds of the battle outside held sway. Then, just as despair commenced to grip Nita, Ferguson spoke.

"Reckon I can't afford to take any chances with that bridge. Besides, damned if I don't believe you're tellin' the truth!"

Nita sobbed as he crawled towards her in the darkness. With the use of a jackknife he soon had her freed. "Can you walk?" he queried.

Nita lied valiantly. "Yes. Don't worry about me. Just hunt for Gregory. I'll do the same. He's got to believe me now!"

"Be careful, girl. Lot o' lead flyin' around," warned Ferguson. Then he was gone into the battle-filled night.

DOGGEDLY Nita followed, to find that the fighting seemed to be concentrated on the side of the camp towards Carsonville. That would be Nick's strategy—to attack from the opposite direction and create the impression that the bridge did not figure in the night's scheme of things. Here she was behind the firing line. Except from an occasional man scurrying about on some unknown errand, she was in little danger of being observed and halted as she hobbled her painful way in search of the horse Nick had said would be waiting for her.

Without compunction she had deceived Ferguson slightly. She had no intentions of attempting to find Stan Gregory. She meant to try to reach the bridge and keep Nick from destroying it. How she would accomplish this she did not know, but she'd have to find a way. After all, Nick was her father, and she must mean something to him or he'd never have bothered to try to arrange for her escape. She would have that fondness on her side.

A hundred yards outside of camp she found the roan, tethered behind a clump of brush. Gratefully she swung into her own saddle, taking torturing weight off her swollen knee. She did not spare herself in riding, however. As she swung the animal's head about, a sort of humming along the railroad track caught her attention.

An object whizzed by. She made out a handcar with three figures aboard, two of them pumping furiously. As she'd feared, the guards at the bridge had been unable to hold out against the sounds of warfare at camp. Only one had been left behind for Nick to deal with.

Nita rode as though for her life. One thing she knew—Nick was no cold-blooded murderer. He would stalk his quarry, knock him out and then carry him a safe distance away before setting off his blast. That would take time. If she could reach him before he got the charge ready. . . .

She didn't. As she pulled to a rearing halt at the sheer edge of the creek bank above the bridge, she called his name loudly: "Nick! Nick! It's Nita!"

The only reply was a sudden pound of hoofs some distance up the stream bed. At the same instant she spied what seemed to be a spark crawling along the dry bottom directly below the bridge.

That had been Nick riding away, unaware of her identity. Maybe he hadn't even heard her approach in his haste to get away after having lighted the fuse. For his own safety he would have made that plenty long. Just the same, that deadly spark was beginning now to travel upward.

WITH a sob Nita half fell out of her saddle. Possibly she was a bit unbalanced in that moment by grief, physical pain, and the emotions that had buffeted her so cruelly during the past few hours. She had no realization of peril or the foolhardiness of her actions.

She slid down the creek bank, fell, scrambled up and ran. Her injured knee buckling at every step, she made it to the center pier. Her sizzling objective was then shoulder high and climbing fast. Another second would put it out of reach. Without the slightest hesitation Nita seized it in her bare hand. Oblivious to seared flesh, she gripped it, grinding out the last spark, not letting go until the fuse ceased to smoke.

Then reaction set in. She saw how closely she had come to getting herself blown to bits. Every tortured nerve and muscle in her body set up a clamor, rendering her dizzy and sick. She fell, hitting her head on a corner of the pier, and then lay still.

Stan Gregory and Ferguson found her lying there quietly a short time later. By lantern light the engineer gazed from her tear-smudged face and burned hand to the charred end of a length of fuse dangling from half a dozen sticks of dynamite lashed to a steel girder above.

"She saved the bridge!" he said in a hushed tone. "She went after that burning fuse without knowing in the dark how close it was to the charge. The crazy, wonderful little thing!"

Very gently he lifted the slight, unconscious form into his arms.

For the second time Nita opened her eyes to find herself on a cot in a tent, and this time with Stan Gregory kneeling at her side. Every inch of her seemed to throb with hurt. There was a new bandage on her right hand, another on her head. Yet to none of this did she pay any heed. What caught her attention first were the sounds of peaceful activity outside.

"The fight's . . . over?" she whispered.

He nodded. "We gave them a hotter time than they'd expected. There was some damage done and a man or two hurt. But we got a few of theirs too, and a couple will live to testify against the Benston Stage and Freight Line. We'll go sailing ahead with the railroad now."

"Was—was one of those you captured—Nick Waldron?"

The engineer answered gently. "He's dead, Nita. We found him with an empty gun in one hand, and a picture of your mother in the other."

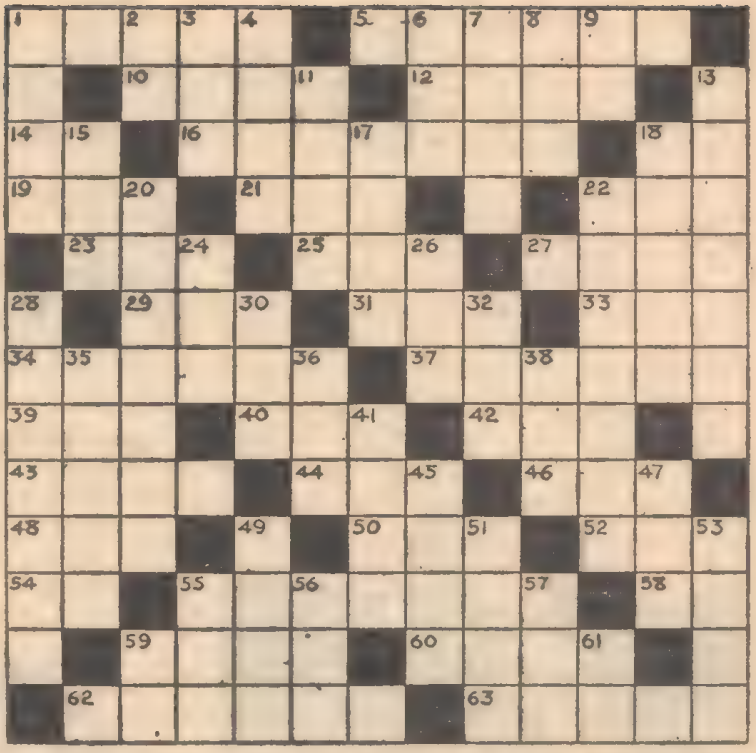
Nita's eyes blurred. Nick had cared then, after all.

"Then maybe they're together again," she whispered.

"I'm sure they must be," answered Stan. "Fergie told me your story. I know words are pretty empty, but after they—they've both been laid to rest, I—well, I want to take care of you—at least until you're back on your feet. After that. . . ."

"After that everything will be all right," she murmured, and put her unbandaged hand in his.

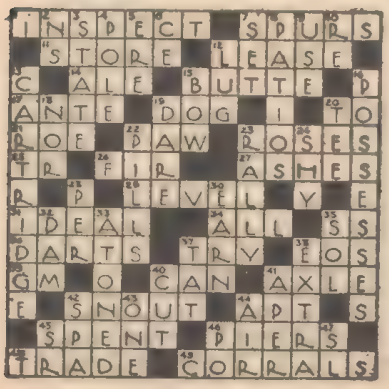
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Roundup
5. Half-wild horse
10. Egg-shaped
12. Melody
14. Within
16. Everlasting
18. Virginia (Abbr.)
19. To find fault
21. Ocean
22. Wash gravel for gold
23. Wicked
25. Curved bone
27. Festival
29. Chart
31. One circuit
33. Wooden pin
34. Hare
37. Distant
39. Whole
40. Mountain pass
42. To court
43. Entry
44. Short sleep
46. To question
48. Color
50. Aeriform fluid
52. Elongate fish
54. Iridium (Abbr.)
55. Harasses
58. Depart
59. Bottom surface
60. Implement
62. Discharges a gun
63. A flat dish



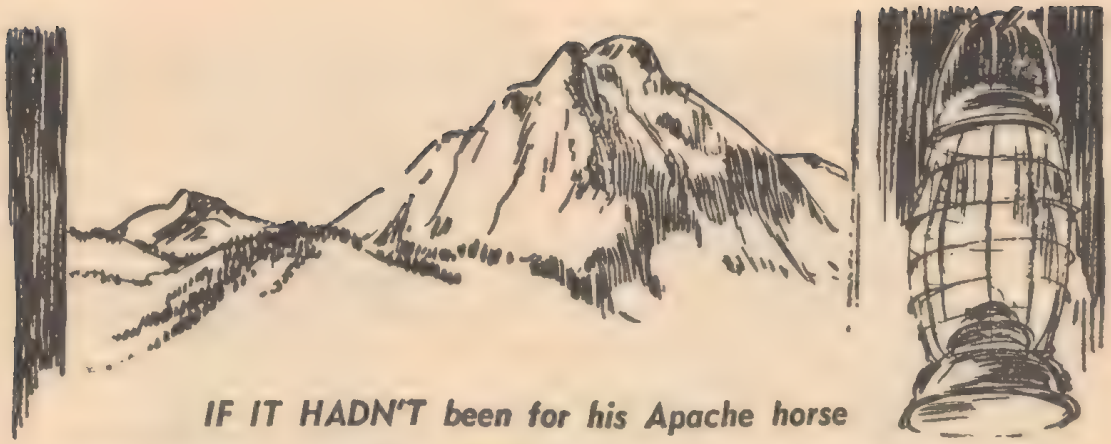
Solution to First January puzzle

DOWN

1. To wreck
2. Note of the scale
3. First woman
4. Feed for horses
6. Raced
7. Spoken
8. Nothing
9. Central America (Abbr.)
11. To look askance
13. Director
15. To seize
17. A small wading bird
18. Man's servant
20. Played cards for money
22. Indian baby
24. To peck
26. To prohibit
28. Broad tract
30. Swine
32. Church seat
35. To change
36. To treat hides
38. New Zealand bird
41. Leaf of a book
45. Former
47. Cask
49. Game played on horseback
51. To halt
53. Theater box seat
55. The lowing of a cow
56. To allow
57. The sun
59. Hush
61. Louisiana (Abbr.)

Barbed Hook

By STEPHEN PAYNE



IF IT HADN'T been for his Apache horse

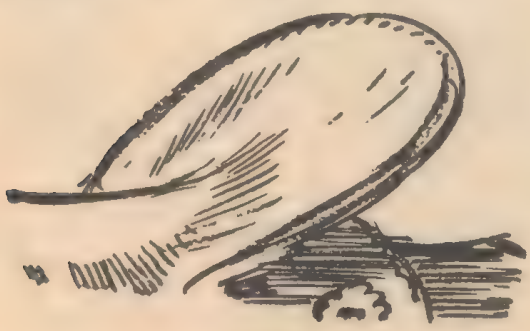
Clint wouldn't have been alive to love — and fight for — Wilda

IT WAS late in July when Clint Charles first saw the Barbed Hook ranch, where he met the Harrison family and fell in love with Wilda. Obliged to return to his responsible job on the Z Bar Z, one hundred and fifty miles away, Clint told Wilda that he'd write often, and he promised her two small brothers that he would be back, and soon.

But a year had passed, and startling changes, of which Clint Charles was unaware, had taken place on the Barbed Hook before he did return.

Deputy Sheriff Harve Larkins of Blue Fork was fully cognizant of these changes when, on a hot July day, he rode out to the Barbed Hook to make medicine, not with Jed Harrison nor any of his family, but with the new owner, a man named Vivian Rathbourne.

The horse watched man and girl who'd forgotten everything but themselves



Larkins said bluntly, "Will either of the two men you've got now do a drygulching job?"

Rathbourne nodded. "Dorgan's harmless," he stated, "but Link Burl'll take it on. . . . How'll you pay him—with hot cash?"

Larkins swore disgustedly. "I'm nobody's fool," he said. "None of that dough must show up here. Might be traced to us, Viv. . . . The man I want gulched will have plenty of money on him to make the job worth while."

"In that case, I'd think you'd handle it, Harve?"

"Nope. Can't. Dance in town. I'll be entertaining Wilda Harrison."

"Wilda? Is she still dreaming about Clint Charles? Still putting you off, Harve?"

"Damn it! That buckaroo sure made a hit with the gal. Even though she never hears from him, she still wants to give him a chance. And that's a chance I don't want to take—if you get me?"

"I get you," said Rathbourne dryly. Watching the deputy sheriff narrowly, he went on, "I suspect that if you'd been nuts about the girl when we first made our deal you wouldn't have gone through with it."

"I been crazy about her all along," Larkins told Rathbourne. "I never gave a hoot what happened to the Harrison family. It was money I wanted so I'd be independent. —money and that girl. I figured I could

persuade her to marry me, move to a new country and forget her damn family. She's tough to persuade, but I'll bring her around yet—if Clint Charles don't show up—now or ever."

"He's the man you want to have bushwhacked?"

"Yes!" Larkins took an envelope from his inside vest pocket. "Here's another letter from Clint to Wilda. Just managed to get hold of this one. Clint has pulled up stakes on the Z Bar Z. He'll arrive here at the Barbed Hook today. Toward night, I reckon. . . . You'll talk to Link Burl?"

Rathbourne shrugged. "Okay, Harve, I will."

"Get rid of the cowpuncher, his horse, saddle, everything," said Larkins. "Everything, except his cash. And I hope it won't turn out to be hot . . . Viv, what are we going to do with that stuff?"

"Be patient, Harve. This winter I'll take a long trip and palm it off. None of it'll be traced back. Hell, it was a perfect robbery—except for the joker which came to light after it was all over. Don't worry about it."

"Okay," said Harve Larkins, and believing he had spiked Clint Charles' guns for good and all, he took himself back to Blue Fork.

HE HAD reckoned without Clint's horse, appropriately named Apache. Long before Clint reached the Barbed Hook he had ample reason to regret his choice of a mount. He was a big, hammer-headed dun, with black hoofs, black mane and tail and a black stripe along his back. He had bottom and stamina and speed more than sufficient for a hundred-and-fifty-mile jaunt in two days. But Apache, badly spoiled, was easily the most treacherous and vicious bronc that expert cowhand Clint Charles had ever ridden.

Upon the slightest provocation and without warning, this horse would "come undone," bog his ugly head and land pitching with savage fury. Nor was he easy to sit. In fact, Apache had badly smashed up two Z Bar Z bronc busters and killed one man, and the owner had been doggoned glad to get rid of him.

Clint, stocky, agile and dark, with arresting brown eyes and a wide, generous mouth, had savvied what he was letting himself in for. Yet now, at the tag-end of his second day on this long trail under the blazing July sun, the ordeal of being on guard every second had him pretty well fed up with such an ornery cayuse.

"Here we go again!" he growled in disgust, as Apache suddenly leaped out and

HARVE LARKINS VIV RATHBOURNE CLINT CHARLES

sideways, throwing down his head, landing with all four feet bunched and legs as stiff as pokers.

In this very same instant Clint heard the crack of a rifle whiplash across the piny hills and heard the scream of the bullet which would surely have got him had it not been for Apache's abrupt explosion. Whether this was pure good luck or not, Clint would never know. Possibly the horse had either smelled or glimpsed the drygulcher in the brush, less than a stone's throw distant as they drifted down through the foothills east of Blue Fork Range.

Clint himself caught sight of a black hat, a flash of light against a rifle barrel, and a puff of smoke. Then he was riding for his very life, for if Apache piled him, that bushwhacker'd make short work of him.

Three more reports crashed in the afternoon stillness—none of the bullets finding their mark—as Apache stampeded down the narrow trail. Ahead, lay the wide, green river valley, and the Barbed Hook ranch.

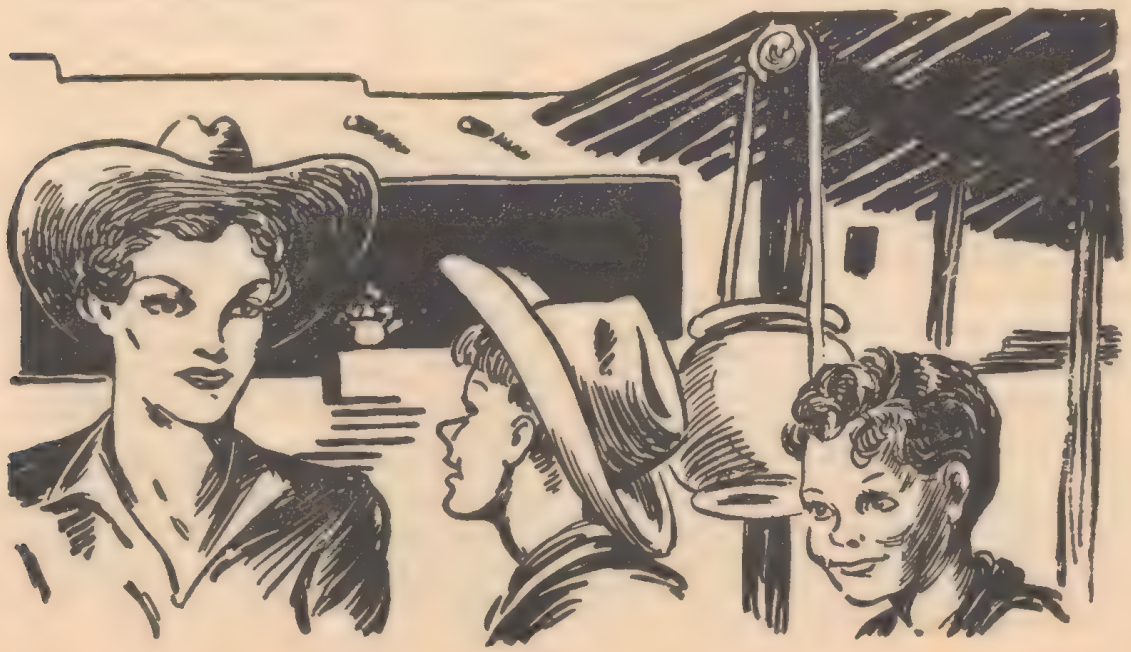
Not slowing for the gate, Clint let the dun take the buck-and-pole fence in a beautiful jump and plunge onward toward the buildings. He threw his concern about the attempt on his life into the background, as anticipation, keen and glowing, yet tempered by uncertainty, brightened his short, square-jawed face and shone from his dark brown eyes.

JUST A FEW minutes now, and he'd be seeing Wilda Harrison again. Wilda, who'd been in his mind these past twelve months. Wilda, who had been the one and only for Clint since that day a year ago when he had delivered a Morgan stallion from the Z Bar Z outfit to the Barbed Hook.

Clint had stayed one day longer than he should, and had asked Wilda to marry him. He grinned, recalling the reply which had definitely put him off, yet had held a provocative hint of future promise. He was, she had said, startlingly sudden, and after all they knew practically nothing at all about each other. Maybe some day when they were better acquainted. . . .

Clint had wanted to stay in the Blue Fork country. But as foreman of the Z Bar Z he could not let his outfit down. Back on his job, he had begun to train another puncher to fill his boots, and time had flown as if on wings of light. Now at last, however, Clint had sold his small start in cattle, and the money received from this sale, plus his wages, amounted to five thousand dollars, which was tucked away in his

WILDA HARRISON 9-YEAR-OLD BOOTS 7-YEAR-OLD DICKIE



billfold. If Wilda liked the idea, he was prepared to start a little spread of their own.

But Wilda's reaction was the question mark, the reason his anticipation was tempered with uncertainty. She had answered none of his letters. Regretfully, he had almost decided she did not want to see him again and that he should not thrust himself upon the girl, when there had come a letter from one of the two small Harrison boys:

> dere Clint
> us fellers sure like you and sure wish youd come again so does sis more than we do. Boots still got the quirt you made him I lost the hatband and my sling shots busted again. Maybe youll bring me a new rubber for it. Ill close now.
> youre friend
> Dickie Harrison
> Nothin aint like it used to be and daddys awful blue.

This letter had warmed Clint's heart and had quite definitely decided him to make the venture. The final line he had dismissed as of no consequence. Last year Jed Harrison had confidently expected to make a real killing with six hundred steers he'd been maturing for the beef, and the market had been high and steady. Therefore Clint had every reason to believe Harrison had made money. Lots of it. Could be that Jed, sixty if he was a day, and twenty years older than his wife, might have driven himself too hard and have been feeling kind of old and tired when Dickie had penciled his letter.

The puncher pulled Apache down to a jog-trot and rode into the Barbed Hook ranch yard, noting with approval the well-kept out-buildings and corrals and the sprawling, peeled-log house. But the flowers and the vegetable garden, pride of Mrs. Harrison, were missing this year, and the atmosphere of the place seemed all wrong. Seemed forlorn, even dismal.

THE HARRISON kids, Boots and his brother, Dickie, should have been bustling around like bees; hired men should have been in evidence, and by this time both Wilda and Mrs. Harrison should have appeared in answer to Clint's cheery hail. Instead, a stranger walked out of the house into the twilight. His hatless head was thatched with reddish-brown, and his face was full and red. He was forty-odd, solid and rugged. When he hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and sized up the cowpuncher with a sharp blue-eyed glance, Clint felt the man's aggressive strength and power.

"Looking for me, cowboy? I'm Viv Rathbourne, owner of this outfit," he said pleasantly.

Clint was habitually a pleasant-mannered, talkative fellow with a clever and ready tongue. But for once he was struck dumb. The Harrisons gone? Seemed awfully queer, when Dad Harrison and his wife had so loved this place. If only Wilda had answered Clint's letters he might have been prepared for this blow. Now, he felt slapped in the face.

Rathbourne's broad-beamed and genial countenance showed nothing of what he might be thinking as the silence ran along, until he remarked abruptly, "Excuse me a minute. I'm making supper," and turned back into the house.

The man had closed the door when he had stepped out, but as he opened it again Clint saw part of the living room, particularly a table upon which lay two stacks of currency, a sheet of writing paper and a pencil.

Rathbourne closed the door quickly, and the cowpuncher reached to his shirt pocket for his makings. As he slowly, fumblingly fashioned a cigarette, he swiveled his head around and saw a man at the stable watching him, and he heard noises indicating that another man on horseback had just arrived at the rear end of this stable. Probably he had ridden in by way of the willow-lined river. Come to think of it, this fellow must have come from the same direction as Clint! Maybe. . . .

The puncher heard the house door open, and Rathbourne's feet on the gravel outside it. He gave the man his attention, saying, "I'm Clint Charles. I know the Harrisons, and I expected them to be here. Where've they gone?"

RATHBOURNE broke in. "You'll find them on a dry homestead over east about five miles. Jed lost the Barbed Hook."

"Lost it!" echoed Clint. "Lost it? How?"

"Tough luck. I was frightfully sorry for the family when I was forced to take over. But I had to be businesslike."

"Businesslike?" pressed Clint.

"I'm a speculator in cattle on the Denver market, a trader," Rathbourne explained. "Sometimes I'm flush, other times I'm broke. I happened to be flush when I staked Harrison for a big gamble in steers. For the two years it took to grow 'em out for beef, he put everything the ranch produced into the cattle. I advanced money for expenses. Late in September of last fall Harrison sold his steers, and on his way home was robbed of the cash he had received for them. To salvage what I could from my investment I was obliged to take the Barbed Hook. . . . It's as simple as that," Rathbourne added rather dryly, and then asked, "You'll stay for supper?"

"No, thanks. But I'd like the details on that robbery."

"It'd be a poor meal anyhow. I haven't got this outfit going yet as I want to. My two hired men and I are just batching. . . . When I restock the place I can use a good cowpuncher. I like your horse, too. Buckskins with black stripes down their backs have got strength and stamina. Want to sell him?"

"No. How much did Harrison lose? How'd it happen? Any suspects?"

"Sixty thousand dollars," Rathbourne informed. "Suspects? We-ell, no, though some folks in Blue Fork name me Number One suspect." He snapped his stubby fingers. "Ridiculous, of course. But I had to prove to our deputy sheriff that I was in Denver at the time, and that I had had no information of Harrison's making the sale.

"Just to keep the record clear, cowboy, Harrison's note, payable to me, wasn't due until October fourth. The day he made his big sale, September 28, he dropped me a line asking me to come to his ranch and get my money. I reached Blue Fork October 2 and was stunned by news of the robbery."

Clint shifted restively in his saddle while Apache cocked one ear back at his rider, as if to say, "I'm watching you, but I'm too jaded to rip into you right now."

"Apparently Jed sold all his steers at one crack," the cowboy remarked. "Where'd he market 'em? Omaha?"

"He didn't ship the herd," answered Rathbourne. "Sold them to a buyer named Nelson Brown. Delivered the cattle to Blue Fork and helped to load them on the cars. Brown paid him the full amount in cash."

"Why didn't Jed bank the money?" Clint put in, provoked with the old cowman and completely forgetting the inconsistency of the fact that he was carrying his own stake with him in cash. "Or at least why didn't he mail you, Rathbourne, the amount due you at once?"

Rathbourne smiled thinly. "There is no bank in Blue Fork. Besides, if you really know Jed Harrison, you realize he's like all of these old cowmen. Prefers to be his own banker." He showed his irritation at Clint's persistent questioning by adding, "I've told you he had written me to come to the Barbed Hook and get my money."

CLINT was tired and disturbed as never before in all his twenty-four years. Obviously Rathbourne wanted to end the conversation, but Clint felt that he must know the whole story. "Do you mind telling me Harrison's story of the hold-up? I suppose no one else really knows anything about it—except the thief?"

Rathbourne shrugged. "After his punchers had loaded the steers, Harrison paid them off and they stopped in town to celebrate. It was full dark when he started for home all alone. One masked man, on foot, with a gun, stopped him.

"Harrison says he was forced to dismount and turn his back to this thief, who took his six-shooter, his wallet and his money belt. Whereupon Harrison, realizing what was at stake, made a desperate attempt to turn the tables. The bandit knocked him cold, and when Harrison at last came to his senses, the thief and Harrison's horse were gone."

"Gone where?" Clint pressed. "Surely that horse could be trailed?"

"Admitted," said Rathbourne dryly. "Deputy Sheriff Harvey Larkins tracked the horse to Blue Fork River, one mile west of the place where the holdup occurred, and found it tied to a willow clump. Jed's gun, empty wallet and empty money belt lay nearby. Apparently the thief made use of the stream to hide his tracks. But where he went and who he is remains a baffling mystery."

Clint swore and then asked, "He could have followed the river to Blue Fork?"

Rathbourne nodded. "Harve Larkins—he's a sharp young lawman, right on his toes—questioned every man of the town, including Harrison's cowboys, who were drinking and pokering most of the night, and failed to pin even a suspicion on anybody. . . . He's still working on it." The man's gaze went past Clint to the stable, and he called, "Come on over, boys, and finish getting supper."

The man Clint had seen at the stable, accompanied by another fellow, shuffled across the yard, and Rathbourne introduced them as Link Burl and Gus Dorgan.

Clint merely said, "Happy to meet you, boys," and apparently gave them no more than a cursory glance. Actually he sized them up with close and critical attention. Two middle-aged, run-of-the-mill ranch hands, not overly bright, but capable and, to all appearances, reliable. Nothing about them to arouse suspicion, and neither wore a black hat.

Nevertheless, Clint was remembering that Dorgan was the one he had first seen at the stable, and that Link Burl had come to the ranch after his own arrival, by the back door, as it were. Burl could have changed hats. The puncher considered asking Rathbourne if he knew of any reason why someone should want Clint Charles killed, and dropped the idea. Even if he did know, Rathbourne would deny any such knowledge. The rifleman must have mistaken Clint for somebody else. There could be no other possible explanation.

AS THE MEN moved into the house, and the door again opened, Clint threw a glance into the living room. The currency and paper and pencil were no longer on the table. Probably Rathbourne had put these away when he had excused himself to Clint.

"We'll be glad to have you stop all night, cowboy," Rathbourne was saying. "Still if you're a friend of the Harrisons, maybe—"

"Of course I want to see them," Clint put in. "How do I find this homestead?"

Rathbourne gave directions and added with a wise smile, "Chances are you'll find Wilda in town tonight. Isn't she the Harrison you really want to see, young fellow?" His eyes twinkled.

Clint was in no mood to stand razzing. But he held the hot retort on the tip of his tongue, asking instead, "Why will she be in Blue Fork, Rathbourne?"

"There's a dance tonight, and Harve

Larkins is giving Wilda Harrison a great rush."

"Larkins? The deputy sheriff?"

Rathbourne nodded and was suddenly grim. "If you don't happen to like that bird any better than I do, Clint, we'll have one thing in common. . . . Cross the valley here and take the road north. It's only five miles. . . . Good luck."

With a laconic, "So long and thanks," Clint prodded Apache east on a trail leading into the willows bordering the river. The moment he was out of Rathbourne's sight, however, he turned upstream and stopped at a point a dozen yards beyond the stable. Dismounting, he tied Apache, for the horse could no more be trusted to stand with bridle reins trailing than he could be trusted in any respect, and then, in the fading twilight, Clint cut for sign on the man who had ridden to the rear end of the stable.

He found plain horse tracks, and at the closed back door of the stable hesitated. Hearing nothing to indicate that any man was there, he went in, had his look at a stalled horse which was still saddled. But what he was looking for wasn't there. No rifle scabbarded on the saddle, nor on others on a nearby rack.

Thinking it unlikely he'd find the rifle, even if his hunch was right, he went out of the rear door, and noticed an object lying behind a huge pile of rubbish, wrecked machinery mostly, which he had missed in entering the stable. It was with an odd, tight-nerved, icy sensation that he picked up a black hat, nondescript and apparently hastily discarded, for it was damp around its sweatband. It was a hat which tallied with his one swift, photographic glimpse of the drygulcher's skypiece.

Controlling his first anger-governed impulses to demand an explanation from Rathbourne, Burl and Dorgan, Clint decided he would tell Deputy Sheriff Larkins about the ugly business. It was incomprehensible because, after attempting to kill Clint, Link Burl had apparently abandoned the idea. Nor had either Rathbourne or Dorgan in any manner indicated that they had wanted to put out Clint's light.

Taking the hat with him, and thinking, "I figure they'll sweat and squirm and do a heap of worrying when they look for this lid and can't find it," the cowpuncher returned to Apache and lined out for Blue Fork.

IN THE KITCHEN on Barbed Hook, Link Burl's manner was both sheepish and defiant as he growled to his boss, "We-ell, you must 'a' heard the shots and then you seen the feller ride in here, not even nicked. Light into me. I've got it comin'."

Rathbourne shrugged. "Clint didn't see you while you were shooting?" he asked.

"No chance! Afterward I figured he'd never think that a man who'd just tried to kill him would have the gall to ride into the ranch where he'd stopped, so I come home."

"Tolerable good reasoning," Rathbourne remarked. "Hmm. Never opened his trap about being shot at. Probably too bewildered by the news I gave him."

Gus Dorgan was silent, his coarse features expressing no emotion whatever. But Burl gave his boss a puzzled glance. "If you'd give me the sign I'd have dropped him here in the yard. Why didn't you, Viv?"

Rathbourne's chuckle was not a pleasant sound. He said slowly, "That cowpuncher'll sure get in Harve Larkins' hair, and I'll get a whale of a kick out of it. Reckon I'll mosey to town after a while to see how Harve's making out."

He turned thoughtful, and after a few moments added, "Whatever breaks, string your bets along with me, boys. Pretty clever jigger, that Harve. Shouldn't wonder if—with a mite of help from me—Harve'll figure a smart way to get this Clint Charles off his neck, and maybe that scheme'll work out to our advantage. We'll see."

THE BRIGHT stars were twinkling when Clint rode into the town's one livery stable. He asked a paunchy, slow and deliberate man, "Miss Harrison here this evenin'?"

"Uh-huh. Larkins come with her jus' a little bit ago. Want oats for your hoss?"

"No. And by the way, this horse is gentle to handle and easy to saddle, but don't get careless and let him loose, hostler."

"You ain't talking to a hostler. I own this place," said the liveryman. "Kelp's the name. But they call me 'Fatty' and I've got so I don't mind it no more. . . . Newcomer, ain't you? Where'd you meet Wilda? Used to call her the gal of the Barbed Hook, but that kinda ain't pat since—"

But Clint had taken off his spurs and was already walking out of the lantern-lighted entryway. Suddenly aware that he was hungry as well as tired and stiff and sore, he stopped a pedestrian, asked where was the best place to eat, and then asked where he'd find Harve Larkins.

"At his quarters likely," was the reply. "The dance hasn't started, and Larkins generally stables his team at his own place, the jail, yonder on that street. Office and quarters in front, stable behind it, mister."

Clint thanked the man, and with eagerness to see Wilda driving him, he trotted toward the jail building. Here he saw a single-seated buggy in the foreground with no team attached to it. The front room was lighted and the door open, and then the sound of Wilda's voice stirred him like fine-toned music, and he paused just to listen to it.

She was saying, "But surely, Harve, all hope isn't lost. Soon, some of those bills will show up somewhere."

"Hot money," returned a masculine voice. "I've been lying low, waiting, hoping they'd turn up. Yet, as I said, I'm beginning to lose hope."

"That those greenbacks were marked is our ace in the hole," the girl put in. "And I still think. . . ." Her words trailed off.

"Hello in there!" called Clint, walking into the light from the door, and halting when he saw Wilda.

Framed by the doorway, against a background of lamplight, she was taller than he had remembered, tall and straight and boyishly slender, with her soft blonde hair braided and wound around her shapely head in a new fashion which appealed to Clint. Under that crown was Wilda's bright-cheeked face, saucy nose above firm wide lips, and Clint saw recognition leap into her large hazel eyes, which lighted with pleasure and surprise.

She ran forward impulsively, crying, "Clint! Clint!"

Clint opened his arms. But just short of them, she stopped, as if checking a wild and foolish impulse and merely held out her hand. This Clint grabbed and crushed it in both his own.

"Wilda, you are glad to see me!"

"Yes, Clint, of course I am."

BEHIND the girl, Larkins coughed loudly, and enraptured Clint pulled his eyes from Wilda's face to size up the man who now stood as if braced in the doorway. Larkins was young and slender, taller than Clint and every bit as dark; and if at this moment his lean face had not been twisted with annoyance bordering anger, he would have been handsome.

In a flash of understanding, Clint Charles realized that the deputy didn't like him. Well, Clint felt the same antagonism. Too bad, when they were certainly going to be compelled to work together to solve the Harrison robbery.

As if she had not noticed the interruption, Wilda said, "I'm going to be frank, Clint. After—after—well, you know what I mean—I thought you would write to me."

"Write to you?" the cowboy echoed blankly.

"Yes," she said, pointing the forefinger of her free hand at his nose. "You know you never did. And when you'd promised to write, I didn't think I should begin the correspondence."

"Wilda, are you kidding? I did write to you."

"I've never had one letter from you, Clint. . . . What's the matter?"

"Matter? This is the third shock I've had since I hit this Blue Fork country. Didn't you even get my last letter, telling you I was coming?"

"No, Clint." She pulled her hand free. "The mail is pretty reliable. I don't see how. . . . Oh, now that you're here, you must meet Harve Larkins, our deputy sheriff. Harve," turning, "this is Clint Charles, foreman of the Z Bar Z."

The men shook hands and mumbled something. But Wilda could not help seeing that they acted like two hostile boys compelled by their parents to be friends.

"Going to stay here long, Clint?" Larkins asked.

And Clint replied, "Depends."

"On what?" said the deputy.

Wilda saved Clint from answering this. "Did you pull up stakes at last on the Z Bar Z," she asked, "and are you really here to stay, Clint?"

"Uh-huh! I changed what stock and other stuff I owned into cash. . . . Seeing you again, Wilda, I almost forgot. There's something I must talk over with Larkins. Could we go inside and—"

"Can't it wait?" said Larkins. "Wilda and I are going to the dance, and the music is starting now. Let's go, Wilda."

He shoved one hand under her arm and made as if to hurry her away. But the girl drew back. "Harve, you know I haven't

really been in any mood for dancing since the robbery. So—" she looked at him in a way which would melt any man's resistance —"won't you let me off tonight so I can visit with an old friend?"

Clint said nothing. Harve Larkins rearranged his face and said graciously, "Of course, Wilda, I'll excuse you. . . . You two take over my office, and I'll go uptown."

"Nice of you, Harve," Clint put in. "But Wilda, much as I love to look at you, I'm sure I'll enjoy it even more after a full meal. Can we go to the hotel restaurant?"

Wilda put her hand on his arm. "Wonderful," she said. "I could do with a bite myself."

Clint was light-headed with joy. But as he and the girl walked away together, he saw from the corner of his eye Harve Larkins standing in the lamplight, shoulders and head thrust forward aggressively and hands balled into hard fists.

They were crossing Main Street to the hotel when Clint saw Viv Rathbourne lope in from the direction of the Barbed Hook, tie his horse to one of the many hitch-rails and then walk to the nearest saloon. On the point of asking Wilda if she could give any reason why the man should have wanted cowboy Clint Charles drygulched, Clint changed his mind. The girl had been so genuinely happy to see him that above all things he did not want to alarm or frighten her.

HARVE LARKINS was walking the floor of his office, which for reasons of economy was also his living quarters—cookstove and other kitchen equipment in one corner, cot in another, and yet a third occupied by his desk. Suddenly he became aware of a visitor who had entered silently.

Lifting his chin from his breastbone, Larkins stared in a hostile manner at Viv Rathbourne, whose eyes held twinkles of amusement.

"What's so funny?" Larkins snapped. Then he stepped to the open door, looked quickly out, closed the door and in a lower tone went on sourly, "I can't laugh at the fix we're in. Viv, what went haywire?"

"Link Burl missed," said Rathbourne. "That's all."

"Missed? Why'd he miss?"

Rathbourne hunched his shoulders. "I don't know. Never asked him. . . . This Clint Charles annoy you—much?"

"Viv, it's a damned sight worse than I thought."

"Well, well!"

"You hoorawin' me? . . . . Listen, you never pried into how I got hold of the letters Clint wrote her. But he's going to get mighty nosy. Do I knock off that foolish old postmistress to keep her quiet, or what?"

"The postmistress, eh? Relax, Harve. She'll be scared to open her mouth, and she won't. . . . Harve, ever since the Harrison robbery this town has cried out for somebody to pin it on.

"Uh-huh. Everybody likes Harrison and his family. If Blue Fork was certain it had the right man, the guilty man, they'd lynch him. Maybe."

"No maybe about it—if it was worked right, Harve."

They measured one another for thirty seconds, then Larkins said tensely, "Well, Viv?"

"If I were you, and the fellow was really in my way, Harve, I'd drop around to the telegraph office, and I'd send a wire. I happen to know the Z Bar Z ranch has a telephone. So I'd ask the telegraph operator at Flint Mountain to phone the message and get an immediate answer. Savvy?"

"I'm catching on."

"I'm sure of it," said Rathbourne. "And if by some chance Clint Charles has no alibi for the night of September 28th of last year, you can go ahead with the next step. Otherwise, I don't think I'd risk it."

Harve Larkins was still, lost in deep thought. Rathbourne looked around the room and then said, off-hand, "You've got some cash to plant on Clint?"

Instinctively, Larkins' eyes shot a look toward the corner which was his kitchen as he answered, "I can fix that. You'll stick around, Viv? Give me a hand?"

"Not me. "I'll make a point of having several men see me leave town, and soon S'long."

Meanwhile, in a quiet corner of the hotel dining room Clint was asking Wilda, "Howcome you didn't get my letters?"

LINES formed between her eyebrows. Seated across from him as she was now in the shaded lights, with the muted music from the dance hall to relax and soothe them, Clint thought Wilda was the prettiest, most desirable lady in the whole world. Yet, now that he could observe her at close range, he saw that her face showed the strain of these recent months, and that her large hazel eyes were clouded with deep worry.

"I don't understand it," she answered thoughtfully. "I usually pick up the mail myself at the post office, but there's never been any letter from you, Clint."

He shook his head and changed the subject. "Wilda, if it isn't too much of a strain, tell me everything you know about the robbery."

Wilda went into minute details. Yet she added nothing to what Rathbourne had already told the cowboy. At least nothing which would give him a clue as to who might be the guilty party.

The generally accepted theory seemed to be that after the robbery the thief had made his way to Blue Fork by way of the river and had there hopped a train. Larkins, the girl said, had worked untiringly to solve the mystery, and done everything humanly possible, but— She spread her hands in a gesture of complete hopelessness.

"Clint," she broke the long silence that followed, and leaned toward him, "I know you'll be shocked to learn that this has broken Dad all up. He's lost all his initiative and won't try to do anything. When I try to arouse him, he says, 'What's the use, Wilda? I'm through as far as getting anywhere's concerned.' "

"I'll pep him up," said Clint with an attempted cheerfulness. "I'll tell him that with the help of my little stake we'll begin all over again."

Wilda laughed, but it was without any mirth. "You're young, you can take it. But Dad isn't any more. The trouble with Dad is that he has been knocked down and trampled on so many times that his old bounce is gone forever. At least, I'm afraid so."

Her eyes misted, as she went on. "It looked like his big chance—the gamble with steers. It would have succeeded amazingly well, if only. . . . Well, although it's not Dad's fault that he was robbed, he blames himself and feels he has let his family down. Mother is braver now than he is, but she's been quite ill." Wilda lifted her shoulders in a gesture of despair.

"How are you making a living?" Clint asked.

"We aren't," she said quietly. "We had to have some place to go, and this wretched homestead was my idea. I had a few dollars of my own, and I bought the relinquishment for a song. There was a good well on the place, and a shack big enough to house the family. . . . I have tried various jobs, but because I have no special training for anything else than ranch work, I can't make nearly enough to support the family." Then she smiled at him. "But why am I telling you all of our troubles, Clint?"

"Because," said Clint, holding her eyes with his own resolute gaze, "I'm in love with you, and you're going to marry me."

WILDA drew away suddenly, tighter-lipped than before. "No, Clint I can't think of it. I can't marry anyone."

"Fiddle! Have you told Larkins the same thing?"

"We-ell, yes. But he—"

"He what?" Clint pressed sharply.

"He won't take no for an answer, and he says that some day soon he'll inherit some property back East and be well fixed. . . . Please, let's talk about something else. About you."

"My plans haven't changed, Wilda. . . . How are the two livewire kids, Boots and Dickie? I'm crazy to see 'em." Clint's face softened, and he produced Dickie's letter, handing it to the girl. "There's one line there of great interest to me," he added. "The one that says 'Sure wish you'd come again and so does sis even more than we do.' Is it true, Wilda?"

"Perhaps, but—" Wilda looked away.

"Sign a paper stating that of your own free will you are deeding the Barbed Hook back to Jed Harrison!"

"You're tired," said Clint. "I'll hire a rig to take you home. We'll lead Apache behind it and—"

"Clint, there just isn't any place for you to stay. No extra bed, no bunkhouse, not even a stable."

He chuckled. "I'll buy some bedding and a tarp. Sleeping out under the stars isn't a novel experience for a cowpuncher, you know."

Wilda smiled. "But seriously, Clint, since Harve brought me to town, he'll expect to take me home. Oh, here he is now."

Clint looked up, startled. Except for him and Wilda, the dining room had been deserted long ago. Even the waitresses were all gone.

In a cordial yet bantering tone Larkins announced, "Eleven o'clock, my friends, and if you still feel you don't want to go to the dance, Wilda, I'm ready to take you home."

She stood up. "I'm ready to go, Harve. . . . This has been nice, Clint, and we can both thank Harve for letting us have this visit together. You'll come to see us?"

Clint rose. "Tomorrow," he promised. "But let me get my presents for the kids and give them to you to take to them."

After Larkins' team and rig had gone, Clint engaged a hotel room and went to bed. He no more thought of locking his door than he would have on a ranch or at a line camp, and he slung his levis carelessly across a chair, forgetting in his weariness that his total life's savings to date were in a billfold in one pocket of those useful garments. Even the loud noises of a cowtown on a dance night, the trampling of heavy feet in the corridor and sound of alcoholic voices failed to keep him awake.

AFTER breakfast the following morning, the town now extremely quiet, Clint sauntered to the hotel desk and pulled out a ten dollar bill in payment for his room. Harry Ellers, a thin, sallow-cheeked man, took the greenback and turned to a roomy safe, open at the moment, to get change. Stooped over, his back to the cowboy, he suddenly became as rigid as if he was a figure carved from wood.

Clint, who was rested and rarin' to go, drummed on the desk impatiently. He'd amble to the stable, see if Apache was okay, get that black hat from his saddle, and then have a medicine talk with the deputy sheriff. If Larkins could give him any clue at all on the robbery, Clint would run it down and—

"What's holdin' you up, Mr. Ellers?" he inquired.

The man stooped lower, took some small cash from the safe and then faced the cowpuncher. His eyes were big and round, and his sallow face was twitching with suppressed excitement, and his hands were shaking as he gave Clint his change.

Clint hunched a shoulder, thought, Too much forty-rod last night, and went out.

At the stable he had untied from his saddle a small package wrapped in an extra bandana and was making talk with the fat liveryman when in stalked Deputy Sheriff Larkins, hat pushed far back, gun belt slung around his hips and right hand on the handle of his holstered Colt. Larkins' good-looking features were set in harsh lines, his eyes held a peculiar hostile glint. Closely trailing him was Ellers, the hotel man.

"You," snapped Larkins, pointing his left thumb at Clint.

"Oh, hello, Harve. Was about to drop around to your place," Clint returned amiably.

"I doubt that," gritted the deputy. "Shuck out of your gun belt and no foolishness. You're under arrest."

Fatty Kelp, the liveryman, rocked back on his heels, and Clint stiffened. "Arrest? What for?"

"I'll tell you at the jail. Unbuckle your belt with your left hand. Hold onto that package with your right—and take it easy."

STARING at Larkins, Clint let his gun belt slide to the floor. Ellers shakily moved around the deputy to pick it up, and then in an excited voice he told the liveryman, "This Clint Charles gave me one of them Harrison greenbacks. He passed hot money, he did. I looked at the serial number, and all in a flash it come to me that it was one of the numbers all us tradefolks has got lists of!"

"Shut up," clicked Larkins belatedly. "I wanted it kept quiet. Now the news'll be all over town. Get along to the hoosegow, Clint!"

As if Clint were the most notorious bandit ever rounded up, Larkins, aided by both Ellers and Fatty Kelp, herded him to the jail, picking up a considerable following en route. In the office, Larkins instructed Fatty to handcuff the cowpuncher, and then he ordered everyone except Ellers and the liveryman to get out. The crowd bunched beyond the front door, tense and expectant.

"This," growled Clint, "is all bunk, Harve. I came straight here from the Flint Mountain country, from the Z Bar Z. I just couldn't have had one of those hot bills."

Larkins took Clint's wallet from his hip pocket. "You two fellers witness this," he directed, and got from a desk drawer a sheet of paper upon which had been jotted down a tabulation of currency serial numbers. Taking one greenback at a time from Clint's billfold, he compared its number with the numbers on the paper.

"Bunk, is it?" he snapped. "What do you see, men?"

In thunderstruck silence Clint observed that every bill which he had possessed was being positively identified as a part of the fortune of which Jed Harrison had been robbed!

"Gosh!" gasped the liveryman. "Thanks to Ellers here, you've nailed the thief with the goods."

"Only some of it. Where's the rest?" asked Larkins truculently.

Clint's thoughts flashed back to the time he had obtained the money. Part of it had come from his boss on the Z Bar Z. Certainly the owner of that outfit hadn't robbed Harrison. Where had the Z Bar Z boss obtained the bills? Here Clint was against a blank wall. Part of the money he had received from a reputable rancher of the same locale for his cattle and a half-dozen horses. The only possible explanation was that the real thief had passed this hot currency in the Flint Mountain country, and now Clint was the innocent victim.

"All right, men," said Larkins. "Remember what you have seen. Ellers, take this cash and billfold and lock them in your hotel safe for the present."

"Only steel strongbox in town," Fatty Kelp remarked. "And it sure comes in handy."

Ellers went out, but the liveryman was still in the office as Larkins turned to Clint. "We've found approximately five thousand dollars, fellow. You might as well come clean. Where's the rest of it?"

Clint, fed up, and so plain mad he could hardly speak, lashed out foolishly. "Oh, go to hell! If you idiots think I robbed Harrison, you're crazy."

"You can't bluff out of it," rapped Larkins. "Hold a gun on him while I search him, Fatty."

THE SEARCH netted nothing more of value. But it did expose what Clint had wrapped in his bandana—a cowboy's nondescript black hat, worn, sweaty, dirty, bearing no identifying mark of ownership.

"What the dickens is he packing that thing around for?" asked Fatty Kelp.

"Search me," said the deputy sheriff, "unless he wears this lid as a disguise."

However, Clint was sure Larkins knew to whom it belonged.

The deputy unlocked a cell door and motioned Clint to enter the cell. Clint, cooler now, figured that nothing he could say at this time would do him any good, so he walked into the cell, and the door clicked shut behind him.

The crowd outside had increased as if by magic, and several hot-heads were vociferously shouting that the dirty coyote who'd robbed old Jed Harrison ought to be lynched. Pronto. But Fatty Kelp and several other businessmen advised them to cool down and go about their own business, and to Clint's relief the noise finally faded out to complete silence.

In his cell, Clint stalked back and forth like a trapped wild animal. What did a man do when caught in such a predicament? He hired a lawyer. Precious little chance of that. The first thing was for Clint to think this situation through and try to figure all the angles.

He heard Larkins moving about the front room and the sound of a wood fire in his small cook stove. Peering through the slits in his barred door, Clint was surprised to see the deputy lift a lid from the stove and shove the black hat into the fire.

"What's the idea?" Clint called.

But Larkins offered no reply.

The harried puncher's thoughts switched to the fact that Wilda had not received his letters. Who could have had any reason to intercept these letters, and why? This strange thing didn't make sense any more than the odd business of the attempt near the Barbed Hook to kill Clint.

"Larkins," he called, "I want to make medicine with you."

"Later," said the deputy sheriff. He went out and locked the building behind him.

Except for the drone of flies against Clint's tiny barred window, the place was very quiet. So quiet, so restful the cowboy threw himself down on the cot where, in spite of the turmoil of his mind, he went to sleep.

VOICES awakened him. Old Jed Harrison and Wilda, Larkins and Ellers were peering at him through the barred door. The girl's face was flushed, her eyes were very bright—perhaps with joy that some of the cash had been recovered. And old Jed, a spare, slab-shouldered man, thin of face, grey-bearded and hollow-cheeked, looked as if he'd received a new lease on life. However, he spoke jovially to the prisoner.

"Hello there, Clint! What's all this I hear about you?"

"Hi, Jed!" Clint shouted joyfully "Glad you're here. I won't run, Harve, if you let me talk with my friends in the office."

"Yes, let him come out, Harve," said Harrison. "Take those damn handcuffs off him, too."

"If you say so, Dad Harrison," Larkins returned. "It's taking a chance, though." Reluctantly, he opened the cell door, and he also removed Clint's handcuffs.

Harrison sat down, turned his eyes on Clint, and said, "I've seen the bills you had, and I've checked 'em with the serial number list which I got right from that cattle buyer, Nelson Brown."

"So jotting down those numbers was the buyer's idea," said Clint. "I'd never have thought of it."

"Shuckins, neither did I," Harrison resumed. "I rec'lect this Brown and me squatting in the shade of the stockyards, him countin' out the money to me. Afterward, he gave me this paper and explained what it was.

"He says, 'My banker and I tabulated these bills I've now given you, marking down all the serial numbers. You know,' he says, 'I'm obliged to carry large sums of cash, and this is one way I can protect myself just a little bit.'

"I kidded Brown some. Shuckins, I wasn't scairt like him of any thief takin' my roll, and what the heck did I want of that list of numbers on paper? But Nelson Brown tucked that paper careful-like in under the sweatband of my old hat. The thief plumb overlooked it, and by golly, it's proved to be the only thing to give us any chance at all of getting the money back. Clint, how come you had them bills on you?"

Clint looked at Wilda. But she was studying her hands, clasped tight together in her lap, so he said, "The explanation's so simple it slaps anybody in the face. You must have figured it, Jed."

LARKINS leaned against the outer door, saying nothing, and Ellers stood alertly near him. Harrison wiped one gnarled hand across his beard and said, "Yeah, Wilda thought of an explanation immediately—that the thief passed the bills in your Z Bar Z country, and by chance you got some of 'em. . . . I figure that's right, Clint, if—"

He paused, and Clint rapped, "If what, Jed?"

"If," said Harrison, bending forward and stabbing the cowpuncher with washed-out grey eyes which were nonetheless cold and challenging, "you can prove an alibi for the night of last September twenty-eighth. Can you?"

The words jolted Clint. For a few moments he tried to recall the year before.

He was thinking that he must have been around the Z Bar Z and that plenty of people could testify to it, when suddenly he remembered that he'd been working alone at an isolated Z Bar Z range camp. He'd been there to try to pick up odd cattle, stragglers, missed on the outfit's beef round-up. For the full week he had not seen another human being.

Desiring more than anything else to be released and to get to work at solving the Harrison robbery, Clint was tempted to lie. But that wouldn't do. Moreover, as the silence tightened, he noticed in Larkins' eyes a glint of something like secret exultation. Wasn't it probable the deputy sheriff had already checked up on him?

Jed Harrison faced Larkins. "Like I told you, Harve, when you come to get me and Wilda, this Clint Charles has got a good reputation. You hadn't met him till last night, but I did last year when he delivered a Morgan stud to the Barbed Hook. Being as he was foreman of Z Bar Z, he just had to be a plumb trustworthy feller. I cottoned to him right away. Me and

Wilda still figure he's all jake. . . . Well, Clint?"

Wilda was now bending forward, watching the cowpuncher's dark face. Clint let his breath go and said briefly, "No alibi."

The girl sprang to her feet and sat down again. Larkins smiled thinly. Harrison's face tightened. "What's that, Clint?"

Succinctly, Clint explained that he had been alone on the date mentioned. "Not that it matters, for I certainly couldn't have known that you were selling your cattle, Jed. Besides—"

Larkins cut in, "That settles it! We've figured that the thief came to Blue Fork by way of the railroad. The same railroad, Clint Charles, which runs through Blue Fork runs on west through the mountains to your Z Bar Z town of Flint Mountain. What could have been easier than for you to have hopped a freight and come to Blue Fork, and hung around under cover long enough to have heard of Harrison's big sale? Then, after laying for him and robbing him, it was easy to make your getaway by the railroad and go back to this range camp where there was no one to check up on you.

"Jed, this fellow is the thief. The only thing we've got to find out is where he has cached the rest of the money. . . . You might as well come clean, Charles."

Clint heard the deputy sheriff through, then, looking at the girl, he asked gently, "Do you believe any part of this, Wilda?"

She answered, "I don't know what to think." Then, abruptly rising and moving to the door, "Daddy, if you want to talk more with Clint, stay. But I can't stand it." She went out quickly.

SPOTS of red appeared on Harrison's cheeks, and he growled, "All broke up. Because she did like you a lot, Clint, you—you— Well, I can't say positive you are a crook, so I won't say it. But I sure enough think it. That cash on you. By grab, you just can't deny evidence like that. Lock him up, Harve."

"All right," said Larkins. "But Jed, how are we going to get the rest of the money?"

"Figure out something, Harve. I— Damn it! I'm hit 'most as hard as Wilda by what Clint's done." And, like his daughter, Harrison lifted himself to his feet and went out.

Clint hunched his shoulders and strode into the cell, fearful that he'd lose control of his temper and punch both Ellers and Larkins and thus complicate the case against him.

Larkins was closing the door when the cowboy heard Ellers going on. "Mighty smart of you, Harve, to suspect him at sight, and tip me off to be watchin' real close for one of them hot bills."

Something electric raced along Clint's nerves. Now just what might that mean? He stared unseeingly out of his small and

dirty barred window as it slowly grew dark.

Clint heard a clock strike twelve. Blue Fork's lights were out, and except for the rumble of a train in the distance and the puffing of a switch engine somewhere near the depot, the town was quiet. But, restless and wide awake, he could hear faintly Harve Larkins' deep breathing as the deputy slept on the cot in his combined office and living quarters.

Quite abruptly other sounds made their way to the cowpuncher's ears, not voices, but the quiet scraping of feet and small rustlings, and a noise like a definite thump, followed by distinct sounds of footsteps in the room adjoining Clint's cell.

DRESSED except for his boots, the cowpuncher hurried to his door and peered out into the darkened room. Two shadowy figures were approaching. He drew back as they reached his door, inserted a key in the lock, and opened it.

"Hey, feller, you awake?"

"Who is it?" asked Clint.

"Friends. You'd like to get out of here?"

"Sure! But—"

"Then come on. Quick."

"Let me put on my boots," Clint replied cautiously. Who in this locale were his friends, except perhaps the Harrisons—and Jed certainly wouldn't take part in a jailbreak. Why wasn't Larkins doing something to stop these fellows?

Booted, and with his hat on, Clint approached the door where the two men waited. "Who are you? What's the idea?"

"I said we were your friends, Clint Charles. . . . We've heard about you and the charge agin' you, and we're doin' you the biggest favor anybody could. Come on!"

"Hold on," said the cowboy. At last he had made out in the darkness that both his visitors were masked. "Strikes me this'll do more harm than—"

He wasn't prepared for the sudden silent and brutal attack which was launched upon him. One man dealt him an uppercut to the chin which almost knocked him out. The other thrust a Colt against his ribs and said very low, "Get movin'."

Half-stunned, Clint was unable to resist as the fellows marched him outdoors to a gully a hundred and fifty yards behind the jail. Here, starlight showed him his own Apache and two other horses, all saddled and bridled.

"Get on your nag or we'll kill you," the spokesman growled in the same very low tone. "I ain't foolin'."

Clint reckoned he wasn't. Swinging to saddle on Apache, who for some unknown reason was not cutting up tonight, he took careful note of the other two horses. They were unfamiliar, and in the uncertain night light he could not see the brands. The men, he saw, had put big roomy overalls and jumpers on over their regular clothing, and these garments, plus their masks, completely disguised them. Their voices sounded strained, as if they were trying to disguise them, too.

One held Apache with his left hand, and with his right pointed his gun at Clint, while the other took a long piece of soft rope and lashed the puncher's wrists tightly to his saddle horn. This second fellow then mounted, took Apache's bridle reins from his companion and rode out of town, heading west into hilly country.

QUITE soon, Clint and his captor were out in the hills, and Clint's head cleared. He breathed deeply of the clean, tangy air and remarked, "I can't imagine what I ever did to anybody here to get folks down on me."

The man ahead hunched one shoulder, but did not answer. Clint tried again. "What's it all about, *friend?*"

"The less you know the better, hombre."

"Bad as that, eh?" returned Clint with assumed lightness. "The funny thing is how quiet Harve Larkins was while you masked buzzards did your stuff. Makes me figure he was in on this play."

The man leading Apache made no answer.

Clint strained uselessly at the cord on his wrists. He could not free his hands, but he had discovered that the saddle was very loose on his horse's back. Apache had learned the cowhorse trick of puffing up when being cinched, but Clint's captors had not taken that into consideration. It gave Clint an idea of how he might escape—a

desperate chance—if they went through brushy country.

"Yeah," he resumed. "'Twas a big feather in Larkins' cap to nab the robber. But you know, *friend,* I suspect that he figured it'd be smart of him to have folks believe that I broke jail and skipped, knocking him out, of course, so he couldn't stop me."

The man ahead broke his silence. "How can you figure that?"

Clint answered, "Just as I've done, somebody else might reason that Larkins framed me. Now, get three-four square citizens believing this, and then going on to wonder where Harve Larkins got the hot currency to plant in my billfold. Savvy the burro? But with me out of the way, the whole deal would be likely forgotten."

"Huh?" said the guard noncommitally, and then dipped down a slope to cross a dark hollow which was heavily wooded with scrub oak brush.

No sooner were the horses in among this brush than Clint fetched both feet out of his stirups and with his heels gigged Apache in his tender flanks. The result was as instantaneous as turning an electric light switch. Apache squealed, threw down his head, leaped sideways, and landed pitching. Whipped from the guard's hand, the flapping bridle reins lasted only moments before the animal stepped on them and broke them. And the saddle on Apache's smooth back didn't last even as long as the reins had.

His first wild leap slithered the saddle up onto his withers, the second hurled it farther forward, and with the third leap Apache was squealing, rearing back and striking out with his forefeet as the saddle careened down over his ears. Clint, landing in a heap with the saddle, narrowly missed being killed by those striking hoofs as Apache jerked free of the cinch, whirled, and crashed away into the brush.

Fortunately, Apache's explosion had startled the other man's mount into stampeding. Therefore the rider did not see exactly what had happened, and when at length he regained control of his horse he took out after Apache instead of looking around for Clint.

CRACKING of brush, thudding of hoofs and curses echoed back to Clint, who, still fast tied to the saddle horn, picked himself up. Then, crouching down, he set his teeth to work on the knot in the cord that bound his wrists to the saddle horn, and soon freed his hands.

Wrapping the cord around his waist for possible future use, he looked to see if there was any weapon on his saddle. There was none, so, abandoning the saddle, he started back toward town. Apache, with his broken bridle, could be depended upon to give the masked man a wild chase. Apache was a doggone good horse after all!

When Clint reached Blue Fork, he scarcely dared hope that the second man of the pair who'd abducted him was still in town. But to the puncher's surprise and joy, this fellow's horse was still tied in the same place where it had been earlier. Clint had no idea of where to find the man, so his eyebrows quirked with a pleasant thought—he'd just take the horse, which would probably obey its natural instinct and carry Clint to where ever it belonged.

First, however, in order to get a gun, Clint walked to the jail. Listening and hearing no sound at all, he went in, fumbled in the dark to open a drawer of Larkins' desk where he had seen the deputy put his belt and six-shooter. But neither the belt nor the gun was in the drawer. Clint scowled with worried annoyance. Since there was no sound here in the building, Clint had an opportunity to find another gun.

The puncher drew the window blinds and moving to Larkins' stove found matches on a shelf above it. He pocketed a handful and lighted one. It burned his fingers before he thought of dropping it. Harve Larkins lay on his cot, his body partly uncovered and his undershirt soaked with blood. A knife was sticking out of his chest.

Clint rallied slowly. He picked up the man's hand and felt his wrist. There was no pulse. Larkins was dead.

Shocked and thunderstruck, the puncher hesitated. For his own safety he should step back into the cell and make sure the door was locked. Then in the morning he could say he had been there all night. But

even though his life was at stake he was not willing to forego his only chance to unmask and identify the men whom he now knew had murdered the deputy sheriff before they had released Clint from the prison! And he didn't like being behind bars.

Something crunched under the puncher's boots with a gritty sound, startling him. He ventured to light another match and saw he had stepped on coffee beans scattered across the floor. Near the stove in the kitchen part of the room a twenty-five-pound coffee drum had been upended, and its contents dumped in a heap on the floor. This seemed one more strange thing to add to the incredible events which had gone before.

ANOTHER match enabled Clint to locate the deputy's gun and belt. He buckled on the weapon, paused at the door, looking around and listening closely before he went back to the horse in the little gully. Again he hesitated. He could now lie in wait for the rider of this blaze-faced sorrel horse, get the drop, and either capture him or kill him.

But, regardless of who this fellow was, the men of Blue Fork were not going to believe Clint's story. Which meant that his only hope of saving his life—other than locking himself in the jail cell, and he had already ruled that out—lay in escape from the town while he still had the opportunity. Moreover, by making use of this sorrel horse—he still would have the opportunity of identifying the two men.

With considerable difficulty he contrived to break the sorrel's bridle reins close to the bit in such a manner that it would appear as if the horse had broken loose. He then fashioned reins of the soft rope with which he had earlier been tied to his own saddle horn, stepped up into the saddle and gave the sorrel its head. And, after leaving the town behind, the unguided horse went to the Barbed Hook ranch!

Excitement was like fire in the puncher's veins as he reined up a hundred yards short of the buildings. Dismounting, he untied the rope from the sorrel's bit and then watched the horse trot into the yard and on to the corrals and stable where it stopped in front of the closed stable door.

After an interval, when no one had materialized to take care of the sorrel, Clint moved in on the buildings. There had been three men here the other evening. He now had ample reason to suspect that two of these men were not present. The third probably was.

First, Clint prowled the main house, and found it empty. He went to the bunkhouse and listened at the door. The breathing of only one man broke the stillness. Clint walked in, lighted a lamp on a card-strewn table, and Gus Dorgan raised up in his bunk, blinked his eyes and said, "That you, Link?"

Keeping his back to the man, and hoping to get some vital information, Clint grunted, "Yeah."

Dorgan yawned and mumbled, "Where in hell did you and the boss go?"

It was clear that Dorgan did not know what business had taken Link and Rathbourne off the Barbed Hook ranch. Clint would try another line.

"Huntin' my black hat," he muttered.

"Huh? Find it? . . . . Whoever took it couldn't prove nothin' by that hat, could he, Link?"

"Might," said Clint, and then he pressed his luck too far. "I never did know why the boss wanted that Clint Charles gulched."

"Hi!" yelled Dorgan. "You ain't—who the hell—"

Clint whirled, gun in hand. "Be a good dogie, Gus. Don't reach for your smoke pole. But get dressed, pronto!"

GUS DORGAN eyed the gun. "Okay," he muttered.

Clint stepped closer to him. "Want to talk, Gus?"

The man tugged on his overalls. "What'd we talk about, Clint Charles?"

"Was Link's shooting at me a mistake?"

"Dunno what you're gettin' at."

"The remark you made just a minute ago proves you do, Gus. Was he laying for me—or for somebody else?"

Gus pulled on his boots. "I dunno nothin'. Say!" He sat up straight on the bunk and stared at Clint, "We heard you was in jail. How'd you get out?"

"Rathbourne figured he could use a man like me and let me out. I'm on the inside now, Gus."

"Nope," said Dorgan. "I won't swallow that. I don't know nothin' and can't tell nothin'. Now don't prod me."

From the manner in which the rugged fellow clamped his mouth, Clint reckoned he'd get nothing more out of him.

"I'm locking you up," the puncher stated. "I got familiar with this ranch last year, so I know where to put you. Hustle ahead of me to that old stone milk-house."

With Gus Dorgan safely out of his way, Clint was about to enter the main house when someone whispered his name. A cold wave washed down his back, he stiffened, and then he recognized the voice.

"Wilda?" he called eagerly. "Wilda, you here?"

The girl detached herself from the shadows of the building and moved out into the starlight and toward him. "You can't be as surprised to see me as I am to see you here," she said. "How did you—"

"Suppose we let how I got away ride along for now, Wilda," he broke in, his nerves a-tingle. "The most important thing is, are you against me?"

"No, Clint. I can't believe that you—"

"Thank God for that, Wilda." Clint restrained an impulse to throw his arms around her. "Howcome you're here?"

SHE WAS quite close to him, her head tipped back, her eyes fastened on his grim, young face. "It's because I suspect Rathbourne."

"So do I," Clint affirmed grimly. "But Wilda, the man had to have a confederate. He proved he was in Denver when your dad was robbed."

"Of course. But yesterday when some of those bills came to light, I thought they had been planted on you, Clint. I reasoned that someone here has that marked money, and if only I can find it in Rathbourne's possession—" Wilda paused, and added thoughtfully, "Yet why should Rathbourne try to frame you? I can't see his motive."

Clint shrugged. He had an idea about who had actually framed him. But Wilda had thought highly of Harve Larkins, so he wasn't going to disillusion her just yet. The fact that Larkins had burned the black hat indicated a definite understanding between the deputy sheriff and Rathbourne. Larkins hadn't wanted someone else to identify that hat as belonging to Link Burl and then begin asking embarrassing questions.

But he did not tell Wilda what he was thinking. Instead he asked, "How long have you been here?"

She drew a deep breath. "After the family was asleep, I walked over from our new place," she explained. "I was hoping to find the Barbed Hook deserted. I wanted to search it."

"Good! That's exactly my idea. So let's get at it, Wilda."

The girl went on, "I waited and waited. About ten o'clock Rathbourne and Link Burl rode out, and Gus went to bed in the bunkhouse. Then I began to prowl the house. I've looked everywhere in it, Clint, and I haven't found any money at all."

"No money?" said the cowboy. "Yesterday, Rathbourne had a great stack of greenbacks." He told Wilda what he had seen the man doing, then added, "Heck! Naturally, he's carrying the stuff on him, in a money belt or a wallet, or both."

"I suppose that's it," Wilda agreed. "Do you know where Rathbourne and Burl are? Aren't we apt to be interrupted at any second?"

"Yes," he replied tersely. "And those gents'll shoot me at sight."

He was close enough to Wilda to feel her shiver. "You must hide before they see you," she said. "But let's try to make sure we aren't overlooking any clues."

The two searched the bunkhouse, the stable and the other outbuildings. So absorbed were they in the search that day had broken before they realized it, and with the coming of day came also Viv Rathbourne. Clint and Wilda, hiding in the blacksmith shop, saw the big man mopping his red face as he trotted into the yard and stopped to glower at his horse, still standing near the corrals with broken bridle reins.

Clint drew his gun and whispered, "Keep out of danger, Wilda. I'm going to nab Rathbourne."

"But why, Clint? You'll get yourself in deeper than ever and accomplish nothing."

"I'll take that chance in the hope we'll find some hot greenbacks on him!"

RATHBOURNE had led his horse into the stable, out of Clint's and Wilda's sight. Almost certain he would next enter the bunkhouse to rouse Gus Dorgan, Clint left the girl at the blacksmith shop and swiftly crossed the yard to steal around one corner of the bunkhouse.

He had waited for what seemed an interminable time before at last he heard Rathbourne's steps. A quick glance showed him the man opening the bunkhouse door.

"Gus!" Rathbourne bellowed.

Clint moved silently in behind him, jabbed his Colt against the fellow's back. "H'ist 'em!"

The surprise was complete. Up went Rathbourne's arms while he twisted his head around enough to get a look at Clint. For an instant, startled fear flashed in his eyes. But in another second he regained control of himself and said calmly, "I heard you were in jail. How'd you get out?"

"That line's no good, Rathbourne," Clint retorted. "No good, even if you have ditched your disguise. . . . Easy, or I'll sure let daylight through you. Bring your hands down behind your back. That's right."

With the same useful cord, Clint lashed Rathbourne's wrists together and then disarmed the man and searched him. To his disgust, however, he found neither a money belt, nor anything of value except some odd change in one of his pockets.

Scarcely had he finished when Wilda called anxiously, "Clint, half a dozen riders are coming this way. Fast!"

As she joined the cowboy at the bunkhouse, Rathbourne looked from her to Clint and back again. "I'll be damned," he declared mildly. "Can it be you are helping this criminal, young lady?"

WILDA didn't answer. Her eyes questioned Clint, who growled, "We guessed wrong. No money on him. . . . Those riders are a posse from town—and it's too late for me to duck and run."

Rathbourne opened his lips, changed his mind about speaking, and smiled with smug complacency. Clint glared at him, fuming with impotent rage. The Blue Fork men would credit Rathbourne's story, not Clint's, so how on earth could he escape this trap? The posse had, however, dropped out of sight temporarily, and a desperate idea blossomed in the mind of the harried cowpuncher.

"Get into the house, Rathbourne," he snapped. "Quick! . . . . Wilda, run ahead and open the door, then open a kitchen window that looks out on the yard. Keep out of sight yourself. You'll back my hand, won't you, no matter how bad it looks for me?"

"Yes," she answered, and sped across the yard.

Clint prodded Rathbourne with his gun. "You slippery snake," he gritted, twisting his face to look as savage and brutal as he could. "I'll kill you as I'd kill a wolf unless you do just what I tell you. Get on to the house!"

Apparently Rathbourne had more than his share of cool nerve, but just as apparently he believed the grim-jawed cowpuncher. At any rate, when Wilda, Rathbourne and Clint were assembled in the kitchen, Rathbourne faced the window overlooking the yard. It was, fortunately for Clint's strategy, a high window, so only the man's head, neck and torso were visible through it. Men on the outside would not notice that his hands were tied.

By this time six stony-faced man-hunters from Blue Fork, all armed with rifles as

well as belt guns, had arrived. Clint's quick and stealthy look, which disclosed that he knew none of them, disclosed also that one of the men was leading Apache by a rope around his neck. Clint's headstall was still on the animal, but no saddle.

Rathbourne, prompted by Clint, called to them.

The spokesman of the party ran his words all together. "Hello, Viv. All hell broke loose in town last night. Prisoner broke jail. Seems like Larkins just must've been careless and not latched the cell door. Anyhow, the cuss escaped, murdered Larkins with his own butcher knife and lit out on his own horse."

The man paused for breath. Clint, crouching, with gun pointed up at Rathbourne, threw a glance at Wilda, who was also keeping out of the men's sight. Her face had whitened; her eyes, reflecting amazement and shock, were on him.

Horses shifted restively in the yard, and Rathbourne gasped, "Well, I'll be damned!"

The spokesman rushed on. "Allowed we should warn you, Viv. Apparently the killer's horse got away from him. Or, more likely, he turned it loose on purpose and stole another some place. Anyhow we picked up this bronc. . . . We had no lawman to lead us, but we sent for Bob Crowder, the county sheriff, and we organized three posses to scour the country. Viv, you and your men better get out and scout around too, quick as you eat. Come on, fellows. Let's go."

"Tell 'em to stable that horse," prompted Clint under his breath. Rathbourne called loudly, "You can get rid of that nag by putting it in my barn, men. . . . We'll be with you right soon."

FIVE of the men dashed to the stable and waited while one of their number stalled Apache. The spokesman, lingering at the house, said in a calmer voice, "Almost forgot to tell you, Viv, that after the murder the thief robbed the hotel safe. Got back the marked bills that were found on him, and a lot more besides. A whole lot more," he said bitterly. "It was the only safe in town, and a good many of us folks had cash stored in it." He cursed, added, "Got to nail him," and joined his men.

As they rode out, heading south along the river, Rathbourne gritted, "You got away with it this once, Clint. But your luck can't hold. . . . Wilda Harrison, what do you think of this buzzard now?"

The girl didn't answer. Seconds dragged out and tightened until Clint said with a shrug, "You've fooled the town jakes, Rathbourne, but you can't hoodwink Wilda. . . . After you sent Link Burl away with me to kill me, you looted the hotel safe. That's what kept you in town so long. What did you do with the cash? I should have stuck you up as soon as you got home. You were in the stable quite a while. Quite a long while, with nobody watching you."

Rathbourne tipped his big head, grinned tantalizingly at the cowpuncher. "You'll never pin a thing on me, fellow. Where's B—" He stopped as if he'd bitten his tongue.

Clint, however, could have shouted with joy, seeing that Wilda had instantly caught on that the man had started to ask, "Where's Burl?" He tacitly admitted that Burl had been with Clint, and that convinced Wilda that Clint was telling the truth.

Her face cleared, and she cried, "Lock him up, Clint, and we'll search the stable!"

Clint marched the man to the unused milkhouse, locked him in with Gus Dorgan, and returned to the kitchen. "I could use a meal," he remarked, and began rummaging for food. "How about you, Wilda?"

"No appetite. I feel pretty sick."

"And no wonder," he said with quick sympathy. "You poor, tired, worried girl. Lie down and rest a little bit."

"No. We must find that money. We must or—or the people of Blue Fork are surely going to lynch you, Clint."

He shrugged. "I wonder if just finding the money will change their minds," he said, munching on a biscuit and swallowing a cup of cold milk.

She looked at him with renewed alarm. "You're thinking that if it does come to light, the Blue Fork men will say that you hid it?"

"Blue Fork believes I'm the thief who

robbed Jed Harrison," said Clint. "And now they think I murdered Larkin and robbed the safe."

"What did happen last night, Clint?"

WHEN he had finished his account up to the time of his meeting her on the Barbed Hook, she asked, "It wasn't until Rathbourne's horse brought you here to the Barbed Hook that you were certain the two masked men were Rathbourne and Burl?"

"Not until then," he agreed.

"Why do you suppose that drum of coffee was emptied in Larkins' place?"

"I couldn't make sense of it at first. But I guess Larkins had his share of your father's money hidden under the coffee, and that Rathbourne knew it."

The girl's eyes widened. "Larkins' share!"

"I'm sorry you liked that fellow, Wilda, and I'd spare you the shock if I could. But I'd be as dumb as a cow if I hadn't got the thing figured out by this time.

"Clint! You can't prove that Larkins—"

"No, I can't, worse luck. But here's what happened: Rathbourne and Harve Larkins figured out the plot to rob your dad. Larkins was the actual thief, and of course he went unsuspected. But thanks to that cattle buyer's precautions, the money was hot and they didn't dare use it.

"Time ran along, and eventually Larkins learned I was coming to see you, Wilda. I hate telling you this, but I'm forced to be blunt. Burned up with jealousy—there can't be any other motive—Larkins got Link Burl to try to drygulch me. When the attempt failed, Larkins saw a wonderful chance to frame me for the robbery."

THE GIRL broke in. "I suspected that was Rathbourne. Can you prove it was Harve?"

"Perhaps not, but I'm certain that before he slipped into my hotel room and substituted hot currency for the bills in my wallet, he had telegraphed the Z Bar Z to learn if I had an alibi for September twenty-eighth, and discovered right then that I had no alibi for a full week."

"And after Larkins had succeeded so well, Rathbourne suddenly decided to double cross Larkins?"

"He's an opportunist, that Rathbourne," said Clint. "Completely selfish and cold-blooded. Without doubt, he reasoned that he had a terrific chance to get Larkins' part of the loot and at the same stroke silence him so he'd never squeal. It would have worked out, except that I escaped, thanks to my horse, as I told you. Is it clear now?"

"Yes. Yes. It's all clear, except—" The girl's voice again trailed off.

"You still doubt that Harve Larkins was as guilty as Rathbourne? Well, there's the matter of my letters. I haven't been able to check up at the post office, but—"

"I have," Wilda interrupted. "We have a nosy old postmistress. She said she didn't know anything about any letters for me. But she fidgeted and acted so frightened that I suspect she probably did intercept your letters to me and give them to someone."

"Is this postmistress hard up?"

"Yes, she's a widow with five kids. This dinky post office job doesn't pay very much, so she also takes in washing and—"

"We won't make any trouble for her unless we have to," Clint said. He heard a faint sound and leaped to the door, suddenly and shamefully aware that he had let down his guard and that either Link Burl or a posse might have arrived.

But as Clint saw who the newcomers were he laughed. "Hello, kids," he said and bounded out to welcome Wilda's small brothers.

Boots, nine, and Dickie, seven, tow-headed, tousled and dusty, shouted in unison. "Clint! It sure 'nough is you! Why ain't you come to see us?"

Dickie dug a small slingshot from his hip pocket. "See? Got a new rubber on, and it sure works good." He fitted a pebble into his weapon, aimed at a tin can in the yard and hit it with accuracy.

Wilda rushed out. "What are you two doing here?" she asked sternly.

"Daddy said you was gone someplace," Boots explained. "Maybe to the Barbed Hook to borrow coffee and stuff for breakfast. So we came to meet you, sis."

"You and Clint and me and Boots all here on the ranch," said Dickie. "Jus' like old times—if only daddy and mamma was here too. Why'd we ever move away anyhow?"

Clint felt something clutch at his heart and a lump filled his throat.

BOOTS said gravely, "That Rathbourne made us to move, Dickie, and I don't like him. I've told you all about it, and you don't ever understand. . . . I'm hungry."

"Me too," Dickie declared.

"Come in, and we'll rustle something to eat," Wilda cried.

As the boys ran ahead of her into the kitchen, she faced Clint. "Get your horse and slip out and hide while you've a chance," she pleaded.

He brushed an unruly lock of hair up out of his left eye. "Nope."

"Clint, no one, not even my father, will believe your side of this. Link Burl, or perhaps another posse, may appear at any minute, and there's nothing I can say or do to save you."

The puncher shrugged. "I'm as safe here as anywhere. Safer, perhaps. Besides, recovering the cash is more important than my neck. We'll start a new hunt for it with Boots and Dickie to help."

"All right, Clint." Wilda's eyes flashed with renewed hope. "Rathbourne must have hidden the money in the stable when he arrived back here!"

Boots and Dickie entered into the spirit of a treasure hunt with zest and vigor, yet nothing came to light in the stable.

Behind the big building, and between it and the willows along the river, lay a pile of broken machinery and wagons and other trash—that mess of rubbish where Clint had discovered the discarded black hat. By slipping out of the stable's back door, Rathbourne could have easily reached this junk heap. However, although Clint, the boys and Wilda explored the heap thoroughly, lifting up every loose piece of junk and looking under it, they were obliged to give up.

Clint admitted he felt sunk. But Wilda said, "We've got to find it. We must. Everything's at stake! Let's work on Rathbourne. Get tough with him, Clint."

Leaving the boys at the stable and cautioning them to stay out of sight if anyone came to the ranch, Clint and the determined girl took Rathbourne from the stone milkhouse prison to the kitchen of the main house. Since the man's hands were still bound together, and Clint was armed, he had little fear that Rathbourne could turn the tables.

"The jig's up, Rathbourne," Clint began grimly. "Burl's been nabbed, and he's talked!"

The big fellow merely jeered, "You're lying. But even if you're not, nothing Burl can say can incriminate me in any way."

"Burl was with you at the jail," Clint pointed out meaningfully.

Rathbourne twisted his mouth into a sneer. "You can produce eye-witnesses to prove it, in that case, why don't you ride to town and summon the sheriff to come and arrest me?"

"That won't be necessary," Wilda returned. "Bob Crowder will drop by here soon. And he's a square-shooter."

THE RED-FACED man shrugged. "Of course you can prove any charges you prefer against me? Of course you can produce the Harrison money—which you've found in my possession?"

Clint had been stalking around the room like a caged panther. He faced Rathbourne and growled, "We've found it, all right."

Rathbourne's arms jerked with a movement which indicated he'd like to snap his fingers derisively if only his hands were free. "Show me," he jeered.

Clint had turned his back on the man to hide his uncertainty when a sharp command from the window froze him.

"Hold still and lift 'em, Clint. You too, gal. Up! Quick!"

Wilda was at Clint's right. He saw her gaze at the window and heard her whisper, low and tense, "It's Link Burl—with a rifle." Up went her hands.

As Clint hesitated, estimating his chances, Link's harsh voice came again. "I can sure drop you with my first shot, cowpuncher."

Clint lifted his arms shoulder-high, and Link Burl called, "Outside here, Viv. I'll cut your hands free while I keep 'em covered."

"Good work, Link," Rathbourne shouted.

He had already started for the door when there came a sharp *ping*. Clint swiveling his head around, saw Burl's rifle slither on the window sill as the man involuntarily jerked his right hand up to his cheek. At this precise moment another small pebble whanged him on the hand with sufficient force to numb it completely.

That break was all Clint needed. In a twinkling his Colt was free of the holster. "Duck, Wilda!" he clipped. "Back to that chair, Rathbourne!" Even as he gave the order he fired through the window.

The bullet tore away part of Burl's hat, cut a furrow along his scalp above the hair line, and rocked him back on his heels. His rifle hit earth, and when Clint bounded out the door Burl had dropped in a heap.

DICKIE and Boots, all eyes, ran around a corner of the building, stopped and gaped at the unconscious man. "We do right?" Boots asked.

"You know it, cowboys!" Clint whooped.

"We seen him snuckin' from the willows to the house," Dickie informed gravely. "We done some snuckin' ourownselves, we did."

In the doorway, Wilda asked, "Is he dead?"

"Just stunned," said Clint. "I'll lock him up with Dorgan.

Rathbourne, looking out of the window, gritted savagely, "To think a kid with a slingshot could do that against a sixgun! You damned kids. I'd like to kill you!"

"He's cussin' us," said Boots.

Dickie nodded. "Cussin' us," he echoed. "Nasty man."

Clint bent over Rathbourne's accomplice, took off his gun belt and searched him. The fellow had discarded the roomy overalls, jumper and mask he had used last night, and was dressed as he usually appeared. There was, however, no money on him, and no clue, nothing of value to Clint and Wilda.

"Rathbourne's a spooky man, too," stated Boots.

"I'm still scared of 'em both," said Dickie.

"Needn't be scared of Burl any more," said Boots to his brother. "He's pretty near killed."

Clint lugged Burl to the stone milk-house, shoved him inside, told Gus Dorgan to bandage the man's head, closed and locked the door and returned to the boys and Wilda. The girl still stood at the open door, gun in hand, one eye on Rathbourne. Clint bent down to put one arm around Duke's shoulders, speaking to him gently.

"You just saved your sister's bacon and mine, cowboy! But why are you kids scared of Rathbourne and Burl? And what'd you mean about Rathbourne being spooky, Boots?"

Boots shifted his feet and said, "Last night they acted awful spooky. We saw what they did."

"Last night?" Clint almost shouted.

Dickie waggled his slingshot at Boots. "You shouldn't of said it. Dad'd lick us if he knowed. You said Dad sure would yourownself, Boots."

Clint threw a questioning glance at Wilda, and asked, "You'll stand up for them, won't you, Wilda?" She nodded and then he said gravely, "Your big sis and I will see that Dad doesn't lick you. So now you can tell us all about it."

"We was bustin' to tell you," said Boots. "Only we was scared 'cause we did run away from home and—"

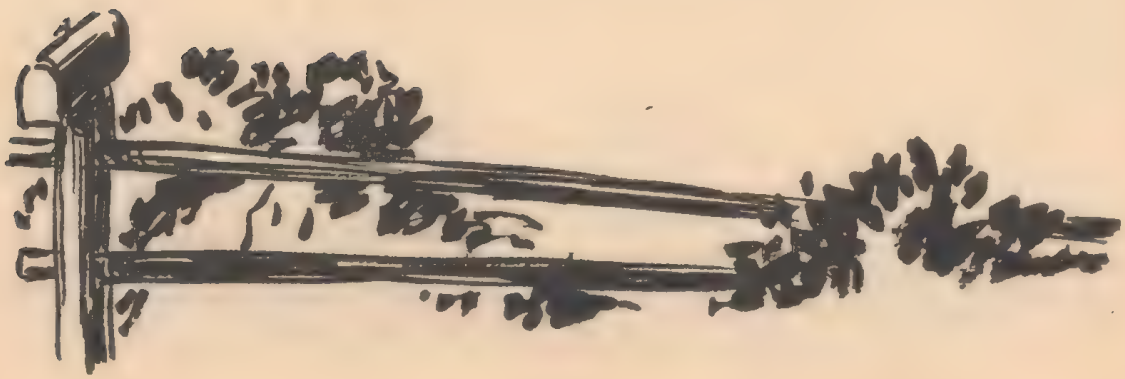
"Boots," the cowpuncher put in gently, "try to tell this adventure from the beginning, like a story in your school reader."

Coming in the next issue

SYNDICATE MAN

A Novel of the Struggle of a Man With a Soul to Fight for a Syndicate Without One

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



"Boots, he's already done it like that," said Dickie. "To me he told it real good."

"It was like this," Boots began. "Dad come home yesterday from town. He was real high up, and some low down too, and we heard him telling mamma some of his money had been found, only Larkins wouldn't let him have it yet.

"And Dad said Clint was in jail and in a damn bad mess. That was the part he was low about, and mad and disgusted. Me and Dickie felt terrible, and we talked it over and thought we'd help you, Clint. Maybe get you out of jail.

"So way after dark—I had stayed awake, though Dickie just couldn't, and I had to wake him without much noise—we snucked out and walked all the way to town. Some lights was still burning, and there was people around, so we hid in a draw back behind the jail.

AFTER a little bit the town lights went out and two men on horses, leading another horse, came to this same place and tied the horses. It wasn't so dark but what we saw 'em good.

"The men put on overalls and big jumpers they had brought with 'em, and looked at their guns and then put on masks over their faces, but we knew who they were."

Clint threw a look at Rathbourne, whom he could see gazing out of the kitchen window at Clint and the two small Harrisons. The man's eyes were slitted, his face rigid.

Boots resumed, "This spooky stuff scared us stiff, but jus' the same, we followed the men to the jail, and Rathbourne said, 'Remember to use the butcher knife.' So they went into the dark room where we know Harve Larkins sleeps. Me and Dickie didn't dare move or do anything. Pretty soon the men came out with you, Clint, and they took you to where they had left the horses and put you on your horse.

"We were quite a ways off and didn't hear what they said right then, Clint, but I said to Dickie, 'They done what we come to do, took Clint out of jail. They got him a horse to ride too!' "

Clint made his first interruption. "Did you boys hear the talk between me and the men while they were in the jail?"

"Oh, sure. All of it," said Boots. "But you know that so I didn't tell you. Me and Dickie saw you go away with one of the masked men, who was Link Burl, and then we just didn't dare to follow or move because Rathbourne was still there. Pretty quick, though, he went back to the jail, and we heard him dump over something that made a sound like marbles raining on the floor. Then he came out and walked fast to the hotel.

"The hotel was dark and nobody was around at all. We watched Rathbourne go —still masked he was—in and light a match at the safe behind the counter, quick and careful. But he let the match go out, and then we thought we should tell Harve Larkins about it. Not about him and Burl getting you out of the jail, Clint, but about him monkeying around that safe.

"Me and Dickie went back to the jail and went in and we called to Harve, and we shook him on his cot. But he just wouldn't wake up, and we got worse scared than ever and ran away to go home. We got into bed all right without Dad knowing about any of it. Early this morning he got us up, and like I said first thing, Clint, we came to the Barbed Hook to find sis."

"You're a smart kid, Boots, and you too, Dickie." Clint's arm was still around Dickie. He looked down at the little fellow and saw that the boy was fast asleep. Carrying him tenderly into the house, he took him to Rathbourne's bedroom, where he put him down and covered him.

Boots trailed the cowboy into the room, and said, "I'm sleepy, too." He climbed up on the wide bed beside Dickie. "You sure Dad won't skin us alive. Clint?"

"I'm sure he won't, kids!" said Clint and turned to see Wilda at the door, her eyes moist and her face warm with affection and understanding.

SEEING that for the moment she had forgotten Rathbourne, Clint leaped past her and raced into the kitchen, where Rathbourne had managed to get hold of a small knife and jab it into a crack in the wall. He had backed up against the knife and was working to cut the cord on his wrists when Clint entered.

"Sit down and behave," Clint snapped. "Who holds aces now?"

"You and Wilda hold 'em," the man said in a rasping voice. His face was flushed, his eyes panicked. "But I hold the joker!"

Rathbourne looked through a window and in the distance saw six horsemen coming across the sage flats east of the Barbed Hook.

"Yonder comes the posse. They'll believe every word those damned kids tell 'em, too. Clint, you and Wilda can turn me over—or you can make a deal with me."

"A deal with a snake like you!" Clint snorted contemptuously.

"Come in the other room, Clint," Wilda asked, and when he had done so, leaving the door open so he could watch Rathbourne, she whispered, "I'll leave it to you, Clint. But remember, Rathbourne has a valid title to the Barked Hook. Getting it back for dad and mother seems a matter of life-and-death to them. Since they were thrown out, they've been slowly dying. If they can only come home, they'll be all right."

Again Clint faced Rathbourne. "What's your proposition?"

"You're to supply me a good fast horse—your own buckskin. Let me skin out with part of the money. I'll settle for twenty thousand bucks. After all, I did stake Harrison to more than that."

Clint eyed him coolly, thoughtfully. "You're asking a hell of a lot," he said.

Rathbourne snarled. "I'm not asking. I'm demanding that you do it. Otherwise I'll hang, without telling where the loot is cached! Hurry up, Clint. That posse is coming this way. My secret in exchange for my freedom."

"How about your two men?"

"To hell with 'em."

"First," said Clint, "you sign a paper to which Wilda and I will be witnesses, stating that of your own free will you are deeding the Barbed Hook back to Jed Harrison."

"I'll do it. Hurry up!"

Wilda got paper and pen and began drawing up the agreement.

"Next," Clint resumed, "we must have all of the cash—except that twenty thousand—the Harrison money, the loot you stole from the hotel safe and my own stake."

Rathbourne, who was sweating profusely, broke in, "Will you and the girl promise that after you get the cash, you will give me the horse and my freedom?"

"Yes," said Clint promptly. Wilda, however, hesitated a minute before she agreed.

"All right. Go get the stuff, Clint. In that junk pile behind the barn. Probe the hollow axles of that old wrecked wagon. You'll find all of it."

SIMPLE WORDS, yet never had Clint known a more dramatic moment. Swiftly he made sure that Rathbourne's hands were still tied securely, then, leaving Wilda to guard him, he raced to the junk pile.

He returned loaded with greenbacks and also gold and silver coins which he dumped on the table. "Count out twenty thousand for Rathbourne," he directed Wilda, who was as excited as he. Again he sped to the stable, where he got Rathbourne's saddle and a bridle and put them on Apache.

He had led the big dun up in front of the house and tied it there.

Wilda cut Rathbourne free, and Clint held a gun on him while he signed the agreement about the ranch and then pocketed his cut of the money. "Give me a gun," he pleaded.

"No, "said Clint. "That posse coming from the east is now in the willows. They'll be here in just a minute."

Rathbourne's teeth clicked. "On that dun horse I'll show 'em a clean set of heels." He bounded outside, untied Apache and swung up.

Wilda looked at Clint with grave concern. "Too bad we had to bargain with that wicked man and let him go— And you let him have your horse, too!"

The cowpuncher's arm dropped around her shoulders. Smiling grimly, he drew her to the door. "I knew what I was doing," he said. "Look!"

A horse's squeal of rage cut the still air. Right in the Barbed Hook yard, Apache had exploded. Hammer-head buried be-

tween his front legs, he pitched high, swapped ends and hit the ground with terrific impact. Rathbourne's head jerked and bobbed on his neck. Frantically he reached for the saddle horn, as he saw six men break out of the willows on the trail to the ranch and rein up, open-mouthed, to watch this exhibition of bronc riding.

Although Rathbourne grabbed leather, with three smashing, lightning-fast leaps, Apache shook loose his rider and hurled the man over his head. A moment later, the frenzied horse's front feet flashed up in the sunshine and then down. His hoofs landed with sickening impact upon Rathbourne's body.

THE MEN of the posse shouted as they spurred in and chased the horse away. Apache squealed again defiantly, triumphantly, as he galloped to the stable.

At the house, Wilda spoke quickly to Clint. "Keep out of sight until I talk to them."

Three men, one of whom was the coroner, sprang to help Rathbourne, who had not moved. The others, who came over to the house where Wilda faced them at the door, were Wilda's father, Ellers, and a grizzled old-timer who had a sheriff's star on his vest.

Harrison questioned his daughter impatiently. What was Wilda doing here? Why hadn't she come home? Were the boys here, and what was Rathbourne up to, riding that dun horse?

Wilda said, "Come in, all of you. I've a lot to tell you, and you might as well sit down and be comfortable while I do it."

The three entered the kitchen. Clint, peering through a crack, saw them stop and stare as if hypnotized at the table where the currency was lying. Then Harrison and the sheriff were both hurling questions at the girl.

"Sit down and let me talk," she countered.

The other men were now at the door, the coroner saying grimly. "That damned horse killed Rathbourne."

"Good!" Wilda exclaimed.

The men stammered and looked uncomfortable, and the sheriff cried, "What do you mean?"

Wilda snatched the envelope and said, "This proves what Clint had figured out. . . . Let the money alone for now, Dad. Do be quiet and sit down and listen to me."

They listened, those six men, hanging on her every word. So did Clint, and when she had finished her story he stepped out and, going straight to Jed Harrison, he asked, "Well?"

The old cowman leaped to his feet, grabbed Clint's hand. "Glory, boy, I'll never forget this day, and what you and Wilda and my little kids have done! Great work! Great. Now, let's check this money."

"You fellows and the sheriff check it," ordered Clint. "Ellers can identify the various sums that were taken from the hotel safe. I claim five thousand dollars out of the general wad, so don't count me short. . . . Come on, Wilda, I want to take care of Apache."

She needed no urging to go through the door with him and on to the barn. In the coolness of the big stable they stopped. "Apache's already gone into a stall, where he's found some feed," Wilda said. "I don't think he needs anything."

"No," Clint agreed, smiling. "But for the rest of his life that bronc'll get the best care we can give him. Won't he, Wilda?"

"Yes, Clint. Yes!" Her face tilted up, eyes bright and happy, looking into his.

"Shucks, we can talk later," he laughed, and then the big dun horse turned its head and cocked one ear forward and one ear back, watching with cool disdain what must have been to him the strange actions of the man and the girl who had temporarily forgotten him—and everying else except themselves.

PETTICOAT LAW

By Cecilia Bartholomew

SUSAN WAS hellbent on saving the town and Sheriff Cal was hellbent on saving Susan, which got both of them into trouble

SHERIFF CAL REEVES had a call to make.

"'Pears to me it must be a social call," his deputy Orin Scoles commented.

Cal looked up from wiping the dust off his boots and shook his head. "Nope," he said, "it's business."

"Never saw you shine your shoes to make an arrest before," Orin said.

"Not going to make an arrest." Cal put away the shoe brush and went over to the cracked mirror on the wall. He had to stoop to look into it. "Hope these fly specks aren't on my face."

"You worried about your face now?"

Cal grinned and began to comb his hair. The blond curls flattened for a minute as the comb went through them and then sprang up again as soon as they were free. "Need some water," Cal said.

"Catch pneumonia putting water on your head," Orin said, his face puckered in bewilderment. It was obvious from the dusty thatch on the top of his own head that he

He came to with the girls grabbing at him

had no cause to fear pneumonia. Then, suddenly, his face cleared. He slapped his leg. "I know," he announced, "you're going to call on Susan Burke, the schoolmarm!"

"You guessed it," Cal said, and pulled on his big hat.

"Women," Orin said scornfully. "Whyn't she stick to her school teaching and leave lawing to the law?"

"You know what she says," Cal said, "anything that concerns the kids concerns her."

"The best way to shut her up," Orin said, "is to spank her. Or better still, buss her good and proper. You ain't bad looking either, Cal, you could do it." He chuckled. "Though, maybe she'd call it bribery."

"And what else would it be?" Cal inquired with a grin. Just the same, his eyes had a wary look in them.

"You want I should go with you?" Orin inquired.

"And give you a chance to kiss her first? No, thanks, I'll handle her myself."

He had said he could handle her himself, but as he left the boardwalk and started down the dusty road to the schoolhouse, he wasn't so sure. The schoolmaarm had been more than outspoken. She had been definitely trouble-making. She had talked to the kids, and she had talked to the folks of the kids. She had said that the law wasn't doing its business. It wasn't enough to protect their money and their property. The law was supposed to protect their morals, too.

She meant the saloons and gaming houses. She said there were too many of them. She hadn't ever said it to Sheriff Cal Reeves personally, so at first he had shrugged off the rumors and had waited for her to come to him with her complaint. He had enough troubles without going out to look for more. But lately she had talked louder and plainer, and townspeople were beginning to repeat what she said and shake their heads in agreement. So Cal decided it was time to go out and look for trouble. He didn't like it much. He'd much rather be going out to look for cattle-rustlers, or stagecoach bandits, but Cal was a conscientious man and he did his duty when he saw it.

HE HAD timed his call at the schoolhouse so that the schoolmarm would be alone, and as he stepped over the threshold, he saw her sitting at her desk on the little platform at the head of the room, behind a pile of papers. She didn't look like a trouble-maker. She didn't even look like a schoolmarm, though her brown hair was caught back smooth, and the collar of her white shirtwaist was prim and tidy. But little hairs that couldn't be caught in the neat knot at the back of her head, curled over her ears, and the high plain collar seemed to emphasize the dimple in her chin.

"Sit down," she said without looking up from the papers. When he made no move to do as she directed, she looked up with a little frown on her white forehead. "Sit down," she began again, and then she saw who it was and got up. She wasn't near so tall or dignified when she got away from that desk. "It's Sheriff Reeves."

"Yes'm, and you're Miss Susan Burke," Cal said. "I'm a trifle long for one of these desks."

She didn't seem a bit flustered. "I thought you were one of my boys. He was to come in for some help. What can I do for you?"

"I've come in for some help, too, you might say."

"I thought you were supposed to offer help, not ask for it."

"Just what can I do?" he countered.

"The children," she said. "In the home they have the mother and father to direct them. In public life, they have the school and the law. We must work together."

"You suggesting that the law is married to the school?"

The pink in her cheeks deepened, but maybe it was just from the excitement of the argument. "You might say so," she agreed. "We are both responsible for the conduct of the young people of this community. I teach them how they should act. You must see that they act that way."

"Anyone in trouble?" he inquired.

"Not yet. But I don't want them to be."

"Well," said Cal putting on his hat and preparing to go, "just let me know."

She came down from the platform on which she had been standing and got between him and the door. He thought she looked kind of cute, mad as she was, but it occurred to him that if he was a pupil of hers, he'd be kind of scared.

"It will be too late then," Susan Burke said. "Now is the time to act. Make all the saloons and gambling places out of bounds for children under eighteen. I want you to set a decent closing hour for all such places. I want you to turn some of the saloons into proper drink emporiums where the children can have a place to get together and buy soft drinks." She paused for breath.

"Is that all?" Cal asked.

"No," she said, getting ready to start again, when she realized his question had been sarcastic. Her smile disappeared and her brown eyes that had been so soft and friendly were stern.

"LOOK," Cal said quickly, "maybe I agree with what you say. Maybe I think you're right. But I couldn't do what you ask, even if I wanted to."

"Why not? Aren't you the law?"

"Sure. But they're not breaking the law."

"Then change the law."

"That can't be done overnight. And that's not my job. My job is to see that the law is enforced, and that's what I aim to do."

"I see," Susan Burke said. "So long as the law isn't broken, you don't care what happens to the children."

Cal did care, and she knew it, but there was no use to talk to her. Orin was right, the proper way to shut her up was to spank her and tell her to mind her own business. Or to kiss her good and proper. Cal looked at her lips and discovered they were the shape of kisses, and for a moment he had a strong urge to take Orin's advice. It rather startled him, for up to now, there had been no room in his life for women.

"If you knew," Susan went on, "that a word from you would save a child from strong temptations, you wouldn't say it, if it wasn't in your duties."

"What do you mean, a word from me?" Cal shouted.

Susan smiled as if she had gotten her way. "Let's sit down and talk this over sensibly," she said. "Now, whether you want to admit it or not, you are a man of influence in this community, by virtue of your job, and by virtue of your character."

"I'm glad at least to know that you don't think I'm personally corrupting your children."

"You're doing worse," Susan said seriously, and Cal groaned inwardly. "You're closing your eyes to the corruption. The men who run these places of gambling and drink aren't bad men. They're just men who don't realize the facts."

Cal cocked an eyebrow at her, but she raised her chin and went on. "If they were approached by the right person in the right way, I'm sure they'd see the issue as it really is and be glad to cooperate."

Cal took that in and suddenly got an idea. He leaned back carefully, telling himself to take it easy. "You may be right," he said. "In fact I feel sure you are right. But I'm not the right person to do it."

Susan's cheeks were flushed with pleasure, and Cal thought briefly how pretty she was that way.

"Then who?" she inquired.

"You," he said with satisfaction.

Her smile faded, and she blinked her eyes as she thought this over. Her concentration was as cute and absurd as a frown on a baby's forehead. "I'm afraid you're wrong," she said.

"You convinced me, didn't you?" Cal persuaded.

"Yes . . . but I'm a woman. Do you think—"

"Ma'am, don't think me fresh, but that's to your advantage."

Her look at him proved that it was an advantage.

"But I haven't the authority," she went on.

"I'll give it to you," he said, playing his ace. "I'll make you my deputy."

He had thought she would refuse. He was sure she would. And then if she wouldn't do it, how could she expect him to do it? He'd be shut of the whole business

at one stroke, and he could turn this into a social call. He found he had a strong urge to do so. He waited for her answer, his mouth already stretched in a smile. She looked up and met his eyes. Her own were bright and daring. She stuck out her hand.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it!"

IF SHERIFF REEVES had been a little uncertain about handling the schoolmarm when he had started out for the schoolhouse, he was more than uncertain as she accompanied him back to his office to be sworn in as his new deputy. If she had any doubts about what was to take place, however, she did not show them. Small as she was, she walked beside him with a free and easy stride, and if it hadn't been for what lay ahead, Cal would have enjoyed the walk very much. As it was, he mopped his forehead with his big bandana twice; he felt called upon to remark that it was a hot day. Susan Burke agreed smilingly, but her own face was as cool as a flower.

At his office, Cal took a deep breath and opened the door. Without taking his feet off the desk, Orin Scoles said, "I was just getting ready to send out a posse for you." Then he took a look and got to the floor quick.

"Orin," Cal said, "this is Miss Susan Burke."

"Y-yes, sir," Orin said, "I know. The schoolmarm."

"And," said Cal, "our new deputy." Almost, he could enjoy Orin's shock.

"How do you do, Mr. Scoles," Susan asked politely.

"I don't know," Orin muttered. "Er—flabbergasted." Susan smiled at him, and Orin repeated with enthusiasm, "Yes, ma'am, flabbergasted."

Cal rummaged in his desk, and came up with a Bible and a badge. He duly swore in Susan as a deputy, and then awkwardly pinned the badge on her blouse. It was kind of a lopsided job, but the best he could manage. She shook hands with him solemnly, and then shook hands with Orin. And then she smiled and unpinned the badge and dropped it into her purse. "I don't expect to show this unless I have to," she said. "I suppose it gives me the right to carry a gun."

"A gun? What you going to do with a gun?" Cal asked.

"A deputy sheriff always carries a gun, doesn't she?"

"Ain't never heard of a she-deputy before," Orin said.

"Well, it's high time," said Susan.

CAL TOLD himself that it was on account of what she had said about carrying a gun that he was on the lookout that night for his new deputy. Fine state of affairs, he told himself. He didn't have enough to do watching out for bad hombres. Now he had to keep an eye on his own deputy.

His heart gave a little jump, though, when he saw her. She hadn't come to any harm yet, but she hadn't any business being out so late. His heart gave a bigger jump when he saw she was headed for Al Tracy's Palace. The darn little fool hadn't any sense, starting with Al's place. Or maybe she had too much sense. Maybe she knew, as he did, that Al just about ran the gambling houses in town. When he talked, all the others jumped. Or rather, when his gun talked.

Feeling the cold comfort of his own gun against his thigh, Cal followed Susan quickly down the street. At the door of the Palace she went in, and he stopped, his face reddening painfully as he thought of the kind of reception he would get when that crowd of men in there learned that he had a female assistant in charge of saloons. Then with surprise, he discovered that he didn't care what they thought of him. All he cared was what happened to her. He lingered at the door though, to let her have her little show, then when she would be convinced that she could do nothing, he'd go in and take over.

He heard Susan say in her clear voice, "Good evening, Mr. Tracy, or rather good morning." And after that he could hear only the usual noises, the men's voices, occasionally a girl's high laugh, the sound of glasses, and the playing of the piano. Then there was a sudden silence, and Susan's distinct, unhurried words, "Well, if you won't

turn the lights out, Mr. Tracy, I'll have to shoot them out."

At the first shot of the gun, Cal was inside the room and heading for Susan. He had time to wonder where a schoolmarm had learned to shoot like that, and then the room was in darkness. He had his own gun in his hand, and he grabbed Susan with the other and made for the door. She slapped his face resoundingly.

"It's me, Sheriff Reeves," he hissed at her, and she was still then.

Above the din of crashing chairs and

"But he's well wrapped and he loves to travel!"

boots and curses, he heard Al Tracy call, "Okay, boys, let's let the little lady have her way. It's late enough. Time for all of us to be in bed."

There were some guffaws and obscene yells, and then a girl's voice said, "What's she doing up, if it's so late?"

That would be Daisy Harlow, Cal knew. She was Al's top entertainer, and his everything else, so they said. She wouldn't like another woman having her way with Al, even if it was for the public good, like Susan said.

"Get a move on, Daisy," Al said with easy insolence. "You're just keeping her up later."

"Maybe you'd like to do that," Daisy accused. And a moment later, "Aw, Al, I didn't mean anything, I was just talking."

"Then stop talking!"

In the general movement toward the door, Cal got out first with Susan. Over her objections he thrust her into a dark doorway, and when Al came out blinking in the feeble light, he stepped forward to greet him.

"You boys are breaking up early tonight," he suggested.

Al looked at him sharply, but he just nodded.

"Al thinks he's back in school again," Daisy taunted.

"I told you to stop talking."

"Can't I make a joke?"

AL IGNORED her and said to Cal, "It's late enough for all of us." He waited until all the men had filed out of the place, some sheepish, some disgruntled, then he locked the door and went off to his hotel.

Susan came alongside Cal and said, "I don't see why you wouldn't let me thank Mr. Tracy."

"Better wait until you know what you have to thank him for."

"He was certainly cooperative."

Cal grunted. "I'll see you home."

"It isn't necessary."

"Just the same, I'll see you home."

Without any more fuss, she accepted his company and started out at a brisk walk.

"How did you happen to be at Mr. Tracy's Palace just at that time?" she asked innocently.

"I got you into this, and I'll keep an eye out for you."

"But if you spend all your time looking out for your deputies, you won't have any time left for your own duties."

"That's right," Cal agreed grimly.

They walked on in silence for a little way.

"I'm sorry I slapped you," she said.

"I—I thought you were one of the men, or maybe Mr. Tracy."

"That's why I was there," he said. "In case you needed any help."

"Well," Susan said happily, "it doesn't look as if I did need any, does it?"

They had reached the house where she boarded with one of her pupils, and she held out her hand. Cal took off his hat, and took her hand in his big one. He wondered if she would slap him again if he should put his arm around her again. But faster than he thought it, she slipped out of reach.

"I'm a fine one to preach early hours," she said. "Good night, Sheriff."

He put on his hat. "Good night—Deputy," adding the last word very soft. She must have heard it, though, for her laugh came back softly to him.

THE NEXT day Cal saw no sign of the schoolmarm around town. It was a school day, and probably she was tending to her own business for a change. He told himself he should be glad of that, but he had to admit that he kind of missed her. The next day was Saturday, and Cal, following an unusual crowd into Ben Miller's saloon, found Susan in the midst of it.

He shouldered his way between the men and found her flushed and excited, trying to talk to half a dozen cowboys at a time.

"Break it up, men," he ordered. "Break it up."

Susan looked up, surprised and wistful. "But Mr. Sheriff, what's the matter?"

"In the first place, ma'am, ladies are not allowed in this saloon."

"But I'm not a lady, I'm a deputy!"

Cal ignored that. "In the second place, I see some kids in here that belong at home."

"But Mr. Sheriff, it's quite all right for us to be here, for me and for the children. Mr. Miller is opening his drink emporium under different auspices this afternoon. From now on, he's not going to sell any hard liquor, just soft drinks, so *nice* cowboys—" her voice and eyes praised them—"will have a place to bring their girls, and children will have a place to meet."

Cal swallowed and looked at Ben Miller. Ben swallowed and said uneasily, "That's it, Sheriff. Miss Burke here has an idea that I can make more money that way and do my duty, besides. She's promised to have a lemonade with any cowboy that asks her today—as a sort of opening day drawing card."

The cowboys began hollering their demands impatiently and Susan called out, "Line up, boys, at the counter, and I'll be right with you."

Cal looked at her accusingly, but she only smiled back with satisfaction. She looked very pretty today, less like a schoolteacher Then he noticed that her hair was not rolled in a knot as she usually wore it, but hung in curls and was tied with a ribbon. Her blouse, too, was different, and had short sleeves and a soft round neck.

"How'm I doing, Sheriff?" she asked pertly.

"I hope you don't get sick to your stomach," he said curtly.

She smiled. "It would be worth it. If Mr. Miller can take a chance with his business, certainly I can take a chance with my stomach."

Cal winced. It seemed very personal talk.

"Don't you approve?" she asked, suddenly anxious. "This was your idea, I remember."

"Well, I didn't expect you'd go at it just this way. These boys, now, you might be giving them ideas."

"They'll be good ideas," she promised. Then she relented enough to say, "I know how to handle my pupils, and these cowboys are really just like them."

Cal looked at her appealing face and stammered, "Maybe you'll have a drink with me, too?"

She smilingly shook her head and backed off to where the cowboys were waiting for her. "Now, really, Mr. Sheriff, that would be too much, don't you think?"

BEN MILLER'S drink emporium did a sell-out business, and Ben was acclaimed a real public-spirited citizen. Al Tracy had closed his Palace at midnight two nights running, and the rest of the places had followed his example. The town seemed to have reformed over night.

"She's a mighty fine girl, boss," Orin Scoles said.

Cal grunted.

"Maybe you're afraid she might run you out of a job," Orin suggested wickedly. "Me, I don't have any objections about working for a lady."

Cal put on his hat. "I'm going for a walk."

"In the direction of the schoolhouse," Orin suggested archly.

"Shut up, Orin," Cal directed.

Maybe he was just too suspicious, Cal thought. Maybe he was jealous. All he knew was that he felt mighty uneasy. It was always calmest just before the storm, and it was so calm now, he could hardly breathe. He stood for a moment thinking things over. He wanted more than anything to go out to Susan's house and make sure she was safe in bed, but time was pushing him. He headed instead for Al Tracy's Palace.

"Hello, Sheriff," Daisy Harlow called out as he came through the door. "You acting as nursemaid tonight?" She sidled up to him.

"How about having a drink with me before the place closes?" he asked.

"How do you know we're closing?"

"I don't know, but you've closed for two nights now, haven't you?"

"Maybe Al's getting tired of your friend's game. We're a little old for school games."

"Who said she was my friend?" Cal asked evenly.

"Whose friend is she then?"

"Maybe she's just trying to do a civic duty, as she says."

Daisy laughed loudly. "Who're you kidding? She'd better leave Al alone, that's all that I've got to say."

Cal breathed easier. It was plain that Daisy wasn't aware that he had made Susan his deputy.

"Doesn't Al have anything to say about that?"

Daisy gave him a sidelong glance. "Al says she's not his type."

"What's his idea then," Cal asked, "playing her game this way?"

"I don't know," Daisy said darkly. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I will," said Cal.

As if he had heard their talk, Al left the game at the table where he was sitting, and came over to them. He ignored Daisy and nodded to the sheriff.

"You closing early tonight?" Cal asked.

"What's it to you?" Al asked.

"Not a thing. I just wanted to know whether I have to drink this down or not."

"Drink it down and have another," Al said good-naturedly. As he turned away from them, though, he looked at his watch, and looking at his own, Cal saw that it was just twelve o'clock. At that moment the door of the Palace opened and Susan came in. She was wearing a big coat with a hood over her head and she looked like a very little girl. Cal half rose from his chair to go to her, but he made himself sit back and stay where he was. Al Tracy was ahead of him.

"Good evening, Miss Burke," Al said smoothly. Then he turned to the room which was suddenly quiet. "Go ahead, boys, don't mind us." But nobody moved, nobody said anything.

"It's after twelve o'clock, Mr. Tracy," Susan said clearly, and her voice was steady and reprimanding. She might have been telling one of her pupils that he was late for school.

"Is there something wrong with that?" Al said. "The sheriff here doesn't seem to think so."

SUSAN turned with surprise, and her disappointment when she saw him sitting with Daisy, showed in her eyes. Daisy picked up his glass and tossed off his drink. Then she laid her arm around his shoulders and tipped her head against his.

"Awright," she said drunkenly, "let's go home. Let's go home together."

Then Cal felt rather than saw Susan whip out her gun.

"Then if you won't turn out the lights, Mr. Tracy," she said, addressing Al, though she was still looking at Cal and Daisy, "I'll have to shoot them out."

Her aim was just as good as it had been before, even better it seemed, for lights were going out all over the room. Then Cal saw that Al had drawn his gun and was helping Susan. As the room was plunged into darkness, Cal leaped from the table

and fought his way through the crowd of men. He felt weighted down, and then he realized that Daisy was hanging on to his shirt and coming with him. Somebody hollered for a light, but Cal wasted no time on that. He heard Al whisper, "You won't get away from me this time, my little schoolmarm," and realized they were close, but in the darkness he fumbled. He heard the door swing open and he sprinted after, and out on to the street. Down the alley across from the Palace he caught a glimpse of Susan's coat, and he plunged after her. It didn't occur to him to use his gun. This was a personal matter, it had nothing to do with the law.

With Daisy hanging on to him, he wasn't gaining much on the other two, and he was afraid they might get away, when he saw Susan fall. He saw Al try to pick her up, but he was having trouble. Then he lunged at Al and forgot everything in the joy of battle. . . .

How long he had been sitting on Al banging his head in the dirt, Cal didn't know. He came to with the girls grabbing at him trying to hold him.

"The lady reminded you that it was after midnight," Cal said, gasping for breath.

"There's no law against it," Al said.

"We're making a law against it right now," Cal said.

"You can't do that!" Al objected.

"Who says I can't?" Cal roared and started to work on him again.

Al relaxed wearily. "Okay," he said.

"The lady reminded you that it was after midnight," Cal said again. "What do you say?"

"OK, boys," Al said obediently, "closing time."

Stiffly, Cal got up, and Daisy helped Al to his feet. Cal watched them go slowly back to the Palace, and then he said to Susan, "I'll see you home." He was ready to square off and have another battle if she said it wasn't necessary, but without a word she started off with him. Then suddenly he remembered and stopped, "You fell," he said. "You were hurt."

"Not badly," Susan said with a small smile. "Maybe, though, I'd better take your arm." She took his arm and they walked on.

AFTER a while she said, "When Al grabbed me in his arms, back there, I thought at first it was you. That —that's why I didn't struggle at first."

Cal took a deep breath and felt as if his chest was going to burst. When he could talk he said, "You see, you do need some help."

"Miss Harlow is a very nice girl," Susan said with seeming irrelevance. "If she hadn't put her arm around you, I might not have been mad enough to shoot out the lights again. And then Al might not have tried to run off with me. And you might not have got mad enough to make the new law."

Cal blinked and reviewed the steps of her logic rapidly. "You mean—" he began.

"You see, it can be done overnight," Susan said happily.

"How is it," he asked, "that you didn't tell anyone that you were my deputy?"

"I knew from the first that you were the right person to do it. You just had to be persuaded."

"Persuaded?" echoed Cal, "but you didn't—"

"Well," she said shyly, "not with words, but I showed you that you can handle some people better than I can."

"People like Al," Cal said. "You knew what would happen."

"Yes, in a way," she admitted. "I noticed he had a roving eye. . . . I guess I'll just keep my badge though."

"For what?" He was suddenly afraid.

"A reminder that I was once a deputy"

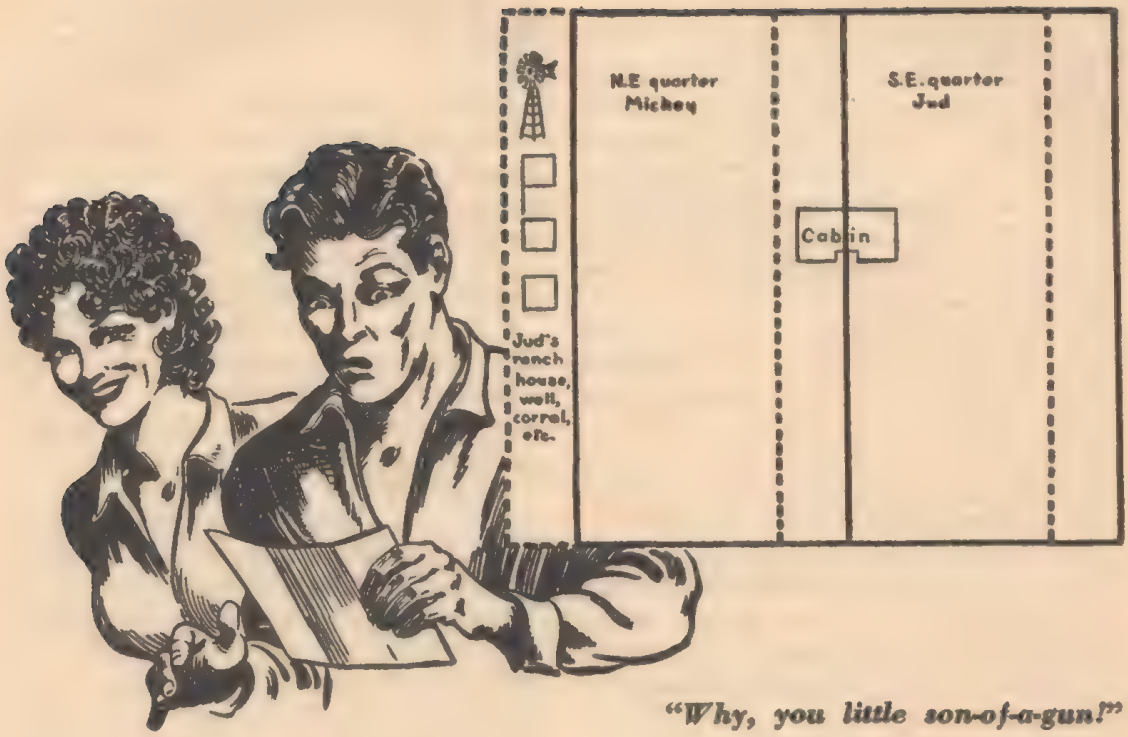
They had reached the gate of her house. "It's very late," she said.

"Maybe I'll drop by tomorrow evening and see how you are—after your fall."

She nodded. "Maybe we can go down to Ben Miller's and have a soda."

He knew he should be going, but there was something that was bothering him, and he just had to find out. He grabbed her quick and waited for her slap. Her hands came up all right, but they went around his neck and stayed there.

"Deputy, nothing," he said. "From now on, you're the boss."



"Why, you little son-of-a-gun!"

FENCE-BROKE

By Dorothy Roseborough

WHEN MICKEY BOONE filed a homestead claim on the Jud Carter range she knew there'd be a hard row to hoe. She was all set for that.

If he wants to fight me he's got to take a look at me first, she thought. Right now he wouldn't know me from Adam's off-ox.

For the first time in her life, Mickey knew that she wanted a man to look at her. Jud was big and dark, with a ragged white scar that ran from his eye-corner to the angle of his firm jaw. It gave him a fierce wild look that riveted Mickey's attention. She had stared at him, determined to make him see her, willing it with all her strength, her body tense in a bitter desire to conquer.

He passed by, and Mickey glanced down at her shabby levis and high mule-ear boots. "Guess I make a pretty sorry kind of a filly," she muttered to herself. She had never thought of her clothes before. They

MICKEY and Jud got all their feuding done before they were married—and there was plenty of it. . . .

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were just the thing for her. She would have been a fool to wear any other kind.

Suddenly she was frightened, because she wanted to fight him. She imagined herself fighting him. She hated him, she was sick with hatred. But why? *Why?* she asked, shrinking from her thoughts. Because no matter how often she repeated that she hated him, it did no good. The violence of a jealous anger and the fear of her own weakness started all over again. She couldn't rest for wondering about him.

Mickey and her Dad had driven across country, selling and trading horses. They

were money ahead and still had a pretty good string when he was taken ill.

They had stopped to water at Massacre Springs. Mickey got her father rolled in blankets on the wagon bed and made him as comfortable as possible. "Don't you worry, Dad," she told him, before climbing back into the driver's seat. "We'll get a doctor in Sant' Espirito and have you fixed up in no time."

Her father lay motionless. His eyes had a glazed, faraway look, as if he had forgotten Mickey. As if he saw something coming slowly toward him.

Mickey set her teeth. Hold your horses, kid, she told herself. It's a long trail to Sant' Espirito. Take it easy.

She drove as fast as she dared, fighting the terrible fear that ached inside her. They struck the little town in the intense darkness just before sunrise. A sudden chilly breeze blew from the east and swung the hanging lantern by the doctor's door.

Mickey watched dry-eyed as her father was lifted from the wagon. "I wish he'd been able to say good-by," she choked. "We made out right well together."

She wiped her sweat-stained face with her sleeve. "Where's the livery stable?" she asked. "I'd like to turn my horses into the corral."

"Right across the street." A big man materialized from the darkness. "There's a bed in the bunkhouse you can have," he added with rough kindness. "Just help yourself, kid. You look about perished out."

Mickey said wearily, "I'll sleep in the wagon. Mighty obliged to you, just the same."

She wasn't surprised. Everyone believed the slim kid was a boy. Leastways until they saw the tight red curls under her battered old Stetson. She couldn't understand why they were such a dead giveaway; they looked just like a boy's curls to her.

Miserable as she was, Mickey felt it a streak of luck that she could sleep in the wagon until she was ready to move on again.

Of course I'll move on, she thought, just as if Dad were still alive. Only now—I'll be alone.

MICKEY CONSIDERED this, lying awake and listening to the familiar steady crunch of animals feeding and the little whiffling sounds as they blew alfalfa dust from their nostrils. The thought crossed her mind that the horses needed rest and a good pasturage. She fell into an uneasy sleep, to dream the unattainable dream of a snug ranch house that overlooked a grass-filled valley.

"I'll rest my stock a few days," Mickey told the hostler. "Want to ride round and take it easy for a spell."

"Ain't figurin' on filin' a claim, are you?" he asked.

"Hadn't thought about it."

"Well, if you get a change of religion, keep off Jud Carter's range. He sure hates them fence-building nesters."

Mickey jerked her hat down over her eyes. "If Uncle Sam thinks they're all right, I don't see what Jud Carter can do about it."

The man grinned. "He ain't done much, but it's a-plenty," he replied. "He's got signs all around that says, 'Warning! No fence-broke cows on this range. Watch out for stampedes!' Ain't no one filed yet."

Mickey climbed on her pony. "Looks like all Jud Carter needs to lose him some range is one homesteader that can't read," she pointed out. The pony sidled through the corral gate and turned toward the Floritas foothills.

The man shouted after Mickey, "Thunderheads comin' over the mountain."

"Just what I need," she called back.

The ache of Mickey's grief rode with her on the lonely prairie. An unconscious instinct in her reached out for healing in the sweep of land and sky, in the smell of warm earth and sun-drenched sage. The pony's rhythmic gait and the creak of saddle leather gave her a familiar pleasure as she climbed the long slope of the foothills.

A few heavy drops of rain fell from the piled-up clouds over the mountain's peak. Mickey looked up. "I don't believe you," she remarked. "I know all about you darn New Mexico thunderheads. But just to be on the safe side I'll get by the overhang of rocks up that canyon."

She crowded her pony against the mountainside and eased in the saddle, waiting for the storm to break. The scattering drops of rain stopped, the thunderheads moved majestically over the peak. The little canyon was as dry as a bone, but a glint of light between two huge boulders caught Mickey's eye.

That's a queer thing, she thought.

She ground-hitched her pony and scrambled over the rocks.

Mickey whistled. A small trickle of water ran from under the boulders. It seeped out through the rocks a little way and then disappeared underground.

WATER! she thought. A spring! Dig it out a bit, make a small tank. There's all the water I could use right here.

"Why, I can swing it!" she exclaimed aloud. "A homestead, a place of my own! Plenty of grass for the horses below the foothills."

She looked down the valley. Not far away in a clump of cottonwoods she saw the slow-turning wheel of a wooden windmill.

I'm goin' to check up on this land and do it quick, Mickey decided.

She took her pony back to town in a high trot. The next day she rode to Silver and filed on one hundred and sixty acres of Jud Carter's range.

Charley Digges, the Land Office clerk, checked and filed Mickey's claim. He leaned back in his chair and looked her over. She wore blue levis and a heavy flannel shirt, but somehow the workmanlike outfit looked pretty sniptious on her boyish figure.

Then, when she shoved back the tan Stetson, Mickey didn't look like a boy any more. Her red hair sprang up strongly and curled round her forehead in little coils that looked like the finest drawn copper wire. She had dark brows. Her eyelashes were thick and black. They fringed eyes that were as blue as mountain water and just as cold. So cold that Charley stayed businesslike, although he was a friendly soul.

He handed her a pen. "Sign here, please."

She said coolly, "You don't have to believe it, if you don't want," and signed *Michael Boone.*

Charley grinned. "That true, sure enough?"

She nodded.

Charley scratched the back of his neck. "Know anything about Jud Carter?"

Mickey kept a poker face. "Know he's a neighbor."

"Got a heap of cattle," Charley remarked.

"Runnin' on open range," Mickey pointed out.

"Got a hot temper," Charley contributed.

Mickey merely grinned at this. Her eyes sparked up a bit. Suddenly they didn't look like mountain water any more.

"Got a quick trigger finger," Charley added.

Mickey stopped grinning. She watched Charley, who scratched the back of his neck and gazed at her thoughtfully.

"Aim to do anything about it?" he asked.

"Aim to buy me a gun," Mickey said. She teetered over to the door, her high-heeled boots clumping on the rough pine floor.

Charley looked at her. There was nothing the matter with her face, and her back was all right too. Kind of a spunky-looking trick. He said, "There's Watkin's place down the street a ways. He'll fix you up with a good one. Just say Charlie sent you."

Mickey turned. She held out a hard, brown little hand. "I'm obliged to you," she said. "If Carter comes in to check I guess you won't remember what that fellow Michael Boone looks like."

They shook hands. "I ain't sayin' you're easy to forget," Charley remarked, "but I'm willin' to let Jud collect his own information. By the way, he pulled out with a bunch of cattle today early."

"Hm-m-m! Maybe time to get me up a shack before he heads for home?" Mickey wondered.

"Maybe," Charley agreed.

She smiled at him, her blue eyes half-hidden behind the dark thicket of her lashes. "Thanks, amigo," she said, and walked out.

STANDING on the porch of the one-room shack, Mickey watched two riders on the road from Sant' Espirito. Single-footing against a strong west wind, the horses raised a dust cloud that followed them in a long streamer far across the plain. Mickey recognized the animals long before she was sure of the riders. The black is Jud Carter's, she decided. That pinto looks like Bowleg Pogy's.

She felt her nerves begin to crawl. They'll never miss where the wagon tracks turn away from the main trail, she thought. She went into the shack and loaded her gun and came to the door again in time to see Jud check his horse. He backtracked a ways while the other rider waited. The two horses came together again. Side by side they began the long easy climb to the canyon claim.

Mickey stood tense and frightened, remembering that Jud hated homesteaders, that no one had ever dared to buck him. I'll bet Dad would've called his bluff, she told herself with a kind of helpless fury, and as if the dead man had spoken to her, she suddenly found within herself a calm determination.

"Cain't no one tell a Boone to git," Mickey said aloud. She went into the cabin and laid the gun on the table. No use startin' any foolishness though, she reminded herself.

Her nerves tightened as the two men rounded the curve of the trail and reined up below the cabin. Moving into the shadows, Mickey knew the same breathless feeling of excitement and expectancy that the sight of Jud Carter had roused in her before.

"We got company, Pogy," Jud remarked. His voice was gentle, but someway Mickey didn't like it.

Pogy shoved back his hat. "Who built that shack knew what he was doin'. Cain't no gully-washer touch it." He grinned. "Looks like the J-Bar-C collected itself a homesteader while we were gone. He must have built himself that shack quicker'n a jack rabbit can squat in a bush."

Jud stepped from his horse. "Reckon I'll say howdy. Keep your eyeteeth skinned, Pogy. We don't want no mistakes on this deal. If you're leery of it you can pull your freight right now."

Bowleg loosened the gun on his hip. "I'll stick around," he replied with pleasant anticipation. "I admire to hear you talk. You sure can tell 'em from who laid the chunk."

"Heyo, the house!" Jud shouted.

Mickey glanced down at her shabby levis and cowboy boots. She jerked her big hat well down over her eyes and stepped to the doorway. "Light and rest your saddles," she invited.

JUD SHOWED his teeth. "Kind of you." There was a nasty edge to his voice. "Whose land do you think you're on, kid?"

"Well—" Mickey drawled. She felt the sweat start on the palms of her hands and wiped them on the back of her levis. Her steady gaze locked with Jud's angry eyes. "Well—it's been filed on by Michael Boone. Kind of think that's who it belongs to until the Government says different."

Jud Carter's tanned face turned a swarthy red. The long scar stood out with startling whiteness. "There's never been a drifter good enough to take over any of the Carter range," he jerked out from between clenched teeth. "You ain't goin' to last any longer than a snowball in hell!" He took a menacing step forward.

Mickey stood her ground. "This was open land," she declared. "It's been filed on as a claim at the Land Office in Silver. I'm no drifter." She reached into the shack behind her and came out with a handful of gun.

"Hey, watch it, Jud!" Pogy yelled. "The kid's tough!"

Carter jumped forward. He gripped Mickey's thin wrist, twisting it until the gun dropped from her hand. He tore the hat off Mickey's head and slapped it across her cheek before he had time to stop himself, before he saw the mass of red-gold curls that had been tucked out of sight.

"A girl!" Jud gasped, still keeping his hold on her.

She twisted and writhed, struggling to get free. Jud hung on, a slow smile beginning to curl the corners of his mouth.

"A redhead!" he chuckled. "There ain't nothin' starts things whirlin' like a redhead. I swear I praise the Lord every time I see one!"

Mickey launched a solid kick at Jud's shin.

"Let me go, you no-account bully!" she panted. "Maybe you can scare off a man by threatenin' to run a stampede over him! Try fightin' a woman! You'll get into an almighty lot of misery."

She stamped her cowboy heel viciously on Jud's instep and felt a furious pleasure as he gave a startled yelp of pain.

"You wildcat!" he bawled, turning her loose in a hurry. "I'll fix you for that!"

He hopped on one foot for a moment. "There's plenty ways of fightin' a man," he gritted, "but there's a heap more ways of fightin' a woman. We'll see who wins."

Mickey watched the two men ride to the bend of the trail. She picked up the gun and went inside the shack. Her bruised wrist ached. Looking at it she saw that Jud's finger marks were beginning to turn purple, and she raged again at the thought of his laughter. She *wanted* to fight him. It would have given her a wild pleasure to sink her teeth in his flesh and clench them with all her force.

Suddenly Mickey made a whimpering sound and threw herself on the bunk. She fondled the discolored wrist and hugged it against her breast. All the wildness and hatred sank away from her. She turned her face to the pillow and lay still a long time, listening to the faint trickle of the little hidden spring as the water dripped from rock to rock beside the shack.

A FEW evenings later Mickey stood listening to the sound of a horse's hoofs stepping carefully between the scattered rocks of the canyon. Saddle leather creaked and the silver tinkle of jinglebob spurs rang above a man's soft humming. Mickey moved back into the cabin and put out the lamp. She waited to let her eyes become accustomed to the darkness.

Jud Carter's voice called, "Mickey! Mick Boone!"

She didn't answer, but stood half-hidden in the doorway.

"Better move clear inside if you don't want me to see you."

"What do you want, Jud Carter?" she asked, and heard a smile in his voice as he answered.

"I'm just tryin' to keep within the law. Figurin' on provin' up on my homestead."

The lamp glass was still hot, but Mickey scarcely noticed that as she lit the wick and pressed the chimney into place. The light flared. It illumined Jud's smiling dark face across the table.

Mickey stepped back. "Homestead?" she said under her breath. "This is *my* homestead. Get out!"

Jud fingered the scar, rubbing its line gently from eye-corner to jaw. "As the survey figures, Mickey Boone, you've got this shack exactly astraddle of the line." He paced across the center of the narrow room. "On this side, nester, your home-this shack exactly a-straddle of the line." where I'm puttin' my bedroll tonight, my homestead begins."

Mickey moved slowly, keeping the table between them. "You can't," she said in a low voice. "You don't dare do that."

"Why, you know the law, Mickey Boone. You know that I've got to make proof of residence, same as you do. Now here's a nice little room right on my land," he smiled. "Ain't that real handy-like? You wouldn't want me to camp out in this rocky draw?"

He's so big, she thought. His shadow fills the room—like a black cloud hangin' above me. She was in a panic. Nothing ever made her feel that way before. Only this dark, smiling man who stood there rubbing the line of his scar. He was taking everything away from her, the home she longed for, and the little money she had that went into its building. He was leaving her nothing but this strange, shaking uncertainty.

"I got a right to kill you for this," she gasped, sliding her hand into the table drawer.

"Uh, uh! Better not!" Jud reached over and grabbed the discolored wrist. He reddened as Mickey winced. "One time you got your comeuppance," he growled.

Mickey snatched her hand away. "You

can't stay here," she insisted. "This is my place. I built it and I'm tellin' you to get out."

"Now see here," Jud said in a hard voice. "Up to that line—it's yours. You don't have to fret none. I won't come over unless I'm asked." He grinned at her, and the lamplight made strange lights and shadows on his face and in his dark eyes. "On this side I'm provin' me a homestead," he told her. "Any time you want to come on my land you're surely welcome, Mickey Boone."

He laid his bedroll on the bunk. He walked over to the table and reached for the coffee pot.

Mickey grabbed for it. "That's on my side," she panted.

"Guess it is now," he agreed, making a long arm and sweeping bread and frijoles to his end of the table. "Ain't I lucky! I sure am hungry."

Aching with suppressed temper, Mickey watched him eat. He pushed the used dishes aside, leaned back in the one chair and rolled a cigarette. "I reckon you'd be right good-lookin' if you put on some frills and weren't always so all-fired mad," he acknowledged thoughtfully.

Mickey glared at him in sullen silence. She would get her mind right on the edge of an idea how to move him out of the shack. Then she'd take a look at his hateful, handsome face, and the idea would slip away as quick as a bunch of baby quail. She pulled her battered hat down over her eyes. "You win this hand," she said briefly. "I'm gettin' into town to Ma Burch's."

She mounted her pony. Jud's black horse stood by the tiny spring. Mickey edged over to him and gathered up the trailing reins. "There's a stray on my land," she called back to Jud. "I'll turn him over to the sheriff. Good walkin', Mr. Jud Carter."

CHARLEY DIGGES put his hands in the air when Mickey boiled into the Land Office, the next day. "Don't shoot! I thought I'd be seein' you. Didn't I warn you about that Jud? He's poison with nesters. But his filin's okay."

Mickey shoved back her hat and clutched at her red curls. "It's sure got me buffaloed. How come my place is on Jud's quarter section? The line ran all right from marker to marker."

Charley scratched the back of his neck. "Well," he drawled, "Early surveys were done mostly by guess and by gosh. Any fool cowboy would move a boundary rock to balance a pot of beans on a camp fire. I done it myself, I reckon."

"Now see here, Charley. Just lookin' round and choosin' a rock to mark boundaries don't seem exactly permanent. It's pretty doggone important to me," Mickey argued. "I spent most of my stake puttin' in first improvements on the place. I sure hate to lose it by not sleepin' there. I want that quarter section re-surveyed and it had better be right soon to do me any good."

"Can't promise a thing. But it's a notion," Charley admitted. "Better keep clear of Jud for a few days until the surveying's done."

"I'm liable to raise thunder if I *do* see him," Mickey burst out. "I hate that man worse than rocks in the beans and no bacon."

Charley grinned. "Most gals say that about Jud before—"

"Before what?" Mickey snapped.

"Don't rightly know. Could be kissin'," Charley drawled. "They keep mighty quiet about it, whatever it is."

"That's one man I'll always hate out loud!" Mickey retorted. She slammed out in a temper.

WITH the Land Office report in her pocket. Mickey rode over the slope of the Floritas foothills. She passed Jud's black horse, hobbled and grazing where the grama grass had a good stand. A light shone from the cabin window. Smoke drifted from the stovepipe chimney. Jud was getting ready to eat.

He stood with his thumbs hooked into his belt and watched smilingly as she stepped off her pony. "Kinder hopin' you'd be here," he said. "Your name's in the coffee pot."

He moved aside and Mickey walked in. The room had been divided in half. Three strands of barbed wire ran from a post in

the center of the doorway across the table to the opposite wall. Jud grinned at her through the fence.

"Home sweet home!" he chuckled. "Shut the door and you'd think you were in the hoosegow—or married."

Mickey took the Land Office notice from her pocket. Folding it so that Jud could see only part of the map, she showed him a rough drawing of the gully and the homestead line. "Take a look at that, Jud Carter," she told him.

Jud looked. The hot color crept over his face. "Well, I'll be dogged," he muttered, staring at the map. "That survey puts the whole shebang clear over on my land. Your shack and the little water-hole. Gosh, I—"

She pointed, and he looked down at the rest of the map, now unfolded. "Hell's bells!" he muttered under his breath: "The new line puts my ranch house over on your quarter section! Corrals, well, everything! Why, you little son-of-a-gun!"

Mickey tried hard not to laugh. She clamped her hand over her mouth. She bit her lips to keep them from smiling. But it was no good. She just had to laugh.

"You still got the shack," she stuttered. Shaking with laughter, she gazed at Jud's dumbfounded face, then went off into a fresh fit of the giggles. "You still got the shack, Jud."

A slow, reluctant grin crept over Jud's face. "Guess I got too funny for my own good," he admitted. "Doggone, Mickey, I sure am crazy about you! Guess you wouldn't tie up to a man with nothin' but a shack full of female fixin's?"

Mickey stopped laughing. "I'd grab you if you'd just a box in one corner and a saddle in the other," she stated, clear and sweet.

Jud clawed at the fence for a moment. Then he took for the door. He met her coming in.

After a while Mickey reached up and ran a finger along the scar. "That a female brand?" she asked jealously.

"That?" Jud caught the finger and nibbled it like a horse taking sugar. "A bronc pitched me into some bob wire. Guess that's why I've never liked fences."

"You will!" Mickey promised, helping him to kiss her. "Yessir, Jud Carter, from now on you sure are goin' to be fence-broke."

GRAVE ERROR

By PHIL SQUIRES

Boot Hill was the payoff, them old-timers claim,
For men that pulled triggers without takin' aim!

There was a moment's silence. Jud slid his hand through the fence and put it over hers as it lay on the paper. Mickey didn't move.

"What do you aim to do about it, Jud?" she asked, her voice sounding queer and breathless.

"See here, Mickey," Jud burst out. "I feel lower than a snake under a wagon wheel. I never really meant to grab your land. You looked so darn cute and kinder redheaded when you got mad—it started me foolin' around—I mean— Dad nab it!" he shouted, "I just fell for you, bein' such a spunky little trick, standin' up to me the way you did!"

Her hand turned slowly under his. He tightened his hold. "What did I put up this fool fence for?" he exclaimed. "Let me get on your side once, and—"

Mickey moved her hand from the paper. "Hold on a minute, Jud."

Good-by to Briscoe

By PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

THE STORY SO FAR:

More than fate seems to be conspiring to keep SANDRA LEE SCOTT in Briscoe, where she has come with a theatrical company in a search for her father and brother, JAMES AND BLAINE SCOTT. First the troupe skips town, leaving her stranded and broke; then when she has sold some jewelry, her purse is stolen.

Her only friend seems to be ED TATE, son of the town's boss, JESS TATE. He gets her a job singing in a dance hall and squires her around town.

Meanwhile Sandra has become interested in a pair of ranchers, CLIFF MORGAN and TODD LESTER, who are Tate's bitterest enemies. He tries to hang Cliff on a trumped-up charge, but Todd makes a daring last-minute rescue. Tate's next blow is to burn down their TL ranch house.

With an old prospector, PANAMINT, Sandra visits the two young cowboys at their line camp, bringing them whatever information she has managed to pick up from Ed. When she proves that the Tates are responsible for the ranch house fire, Todd grimly determines to collect damages.

He and his crew round up both Ed and Jess and bring them to trial before the same justice of the peace who condemned Cliff. By force Todd and Cliff get a judgment in their favor, just as the town marshal surrounds the house and demands the surrender of the whole TL crew.

CONCLUSION

SANDRA'S first impulse was to get out of the house at once, but curiosity to see what effect the announcement would have on those in the front room held her. Her gaze went to Jess Tate. The rage in his face had given way to pleased expectation. His eyes no longer glared, they shone with triumph. She noticed that Cliff was removing the gag from his mouth.

Ed Tate was as exultant as his father. He sprang to his feet and cried, "Now we'll have a real trial! Lester, you'll swing alongside Cliff Morgan for this!"

One of his guards seized him by the coat collar, growled, "Sit down!" and deposited him violently in his chair. Todd paid him no attention whatever. He leaned forward and picked up the judgment Clauser had just signed, scanned the signature carefully, then folded the paper and put it into a pocket.

He said to the man who had come in with the news, "Get the other boys inside and bar the door. Cliff, keep an eye on Clauser while I get word to the one in back."

He started for the kitchen, and Sandra scurried into a corner and hid behind the stove. As Todd reached the back door she heard Panamint say, "Todd, some of 'em are cuttin' back into the alley. What'll we do?"

"Take it easy," advised Todd coolly. "Anybody else out here?"

"Nope. Just me."

"Come in and lock the door. If anybody tries to get in tell them I'm dealing with Crawley up front."

He went back into the sitting room and Panamint came in and whispered "Sandra!"

She came from her hiding place. "I'm here, Panamint. What shall I do?"

"Nothin' you can do now." He turned and shot the bolt on the back door. "Todd says not to worry; that's enough for me."

Sandra discovered suddenly that it was sufficient for her, too. She stopped trembling and confidence returned. She went back to the swinging door, pushed it open a crack and looked in. Everybody was in his place. Todd said, "Court's adjourned."

She saw Jess Tate exchange a glance with his son, saw the grim smiles which

flickered briefly on their faces. She could guess what they were thinking. Lester had won his case and gotten his judgment, but the money had not been collected and never would be.

Marshal Crawley was hammering on the front door and his muffled voice reached her. "This is the law! Open up, Lester, or we'll bust in!"

Todd walked through the parlor and disappeared from Sandra's view; but in the deep silence which followed the voices of both men came to Sandra and Panamint, who now crouched beside her.

"This is Lester, Crawley. What do you want?"

"I want you and Cliff Morgan. You can't get away this time. I got the place surrounded and two men to your one. Come out with your hands in the air, or we'll bust in and carry you out feet first!"

"While you're doing it," said Todd calmly, "what do you think is going to happen to Jess and Ed Tate?"

"Jess and Ed!" It was almost a yell. "They in there? Lester, you're bluffin'! Jess, if you're in there, speak up!"

The triumph had gone out of Tate's face. Cliff nudged him and said, "Go ahead, Jess—speak up."

Jess called viciously, "Yes, damn it! They've got us."

Lester waited until Crawley had assimilated this, then said in the same cold voice, "You see how it is, Crawley. Breaking in would be foolish. You might get us, but we'd be sure to get Jess and Ed first. And without them, what would become of you? What would become of Briscoe?"

"Damn you for a white-livered skunk!"

Todd's voice sharpened. "Listen to me and do as I say. Call off your men. Take them to the Frontier and stay inside for half an hour. We'll leave and take Jess and Ed with us. At the end of that time we'll turn them loose. From then on you can do as you wish. Got it?"

There was a moment of silence, then a

She saw the night deputy in his chair and went back to her room

choked, "Yeah, we got it all right."

"Get going. A man will be watching from a window. Don't try any funny stuff. If a shot is fired Jess and Ed will sure enough get theirs. Make your men understand that; we want no more accidents."

After that there was a rather long silence, except for the distant shuffling of boots or an occasional indistinct order. Sandra heard men moving about in the alley, but at last even these sounds were gone. A voice from upstairs reported, "They've gone into the Frontier, Todd."

Todd said, "We'll leave in a bunch and stay in a bunch while we pick up our horses. The—guests—will walk. Go out the front way, guests first." He turned once more towards the kitchen and Sandra scurried for cover. Todd pushed open the door and whispered, "Panamint, I don't think anybody saw you. Get out the back way and lie low. Stay at your gulch for a few days. So long."

He left and they waited until it was safe to venture into the alley.

"Me first," said Panamint. "Just in case."

But there was nothing to fear. Sandra waited for another five minutes then stole out into the darkness and made her furtive way to the hotel and thence to her room. She locked the door and crossed to the window. The street was empty. Just another Friday night.

JESS TATE, his son Ed and Marshal Crawley stood in the living room of the Tate residence. They were tired and angry, and their voices were harsh with humiliation.

"I'll break that man if it's the last thing I do," declared Jess. "I'll smash him into the ground and trample him! I'll take every head of his stock and burn what's left of his spread! By Judas, no man's goin' to humble Jess Tate and get away with it!"

"I done the best I could," alibied Crawley. "When I heard they had you and Ed, there wasn't nothin' I could do but take his danged orders. You know that, Jess."

"Yes, I know it. I'm not blamin' you. But that danged weak-kneed Clauser! That white-livered Burt Peters! I'll nail their hides to the wall for this." He turned to Crawley. "How'd you get wise to what was goin' on?"

"The night deputy run across that palomino of Morgan's. He got me up and we started a search. Figgered he might be tryin' to get into the hotel again and went through it." He glanced at Ed. "That Lee woman wasn't in her room."

"No?" Ed was startled.

"No. Well, we kept lookin' around, and by and by we found Lester's roan. Then we kept findin' more hosses with TL brands on 'em. We seen two men loungin' outside Clauser's house and spotted another in the alley. Lights were on in the settin' room but the shades were down. I figgered that for some reason they were in there."

"Well," admitted Jess grudgingly, "there's no fault to find with you. And things ain't as bad as they might be. Lester got his judgment, but he'll never collect the money."

Ed said, "Maybe Lester's counting on your keeping your promise to abide by Clauser's verdict."

"Abide by that verdict! Forced at the point of a gun! Witnesses intimidated, false testimony—"

"Well, what about Cliff Morgan's trial?"

"Shut up!" Jess glared at his son for a moment, then went on. "The fool would have done better to take the money when he came after me. There's over a thousand dollars in the cash box in my desk. But no; he had to put on a show. Well, that show cost him exactly one thousand bucks!"

"Did it?" Ed spoke suddenly, his eyes fixed on the desk. One of the drawers had been pulled out.

Jess followed the direction of his gaze, gave a violent start, then crossed swiftly and looked into the drawer. He lifted out a metal box and raised the lid. There were a few bills and some silver and a slip of paper in the box. He swore and picked up the paper, and Ed and Crawley read it over his shoulder. It said:

Received of Jess Tate, One Thousand

Dollars ($1,000) in payment of judgment rendered this day by Judge Clauser in favor of Todd Lester and Cliff Morgan.

It was signed by the owners of the TL ranch.

"WHERE were you last night?" asked Ed Tate.

Sandra glanced at him quickly. There was an unusual sharpness in his voice. He returned her look through narrowed lids. "And don't tell me you were in your room the whole time, because you weren't."

They were seated at the dining table and it was noon, Sandra having skipped breakfast yet another morning.

"I don't like your tone," she said coolly. "It really isn't any of your business where I was."

"Oh, but it is! You see, one of Crawley's men came across that palomino of Cliff Morgan's. They thought he might be visiting the hotel again and went through it. Your door was unlocked, and you weren't inside. Where were you?"

"I still don't see that it's any of your affair, but I don't mind telling you. I wasn't tired and I wasn't sleepy, so I sat at the window awhile, then put on a wrap and went for a walk."

"You went out alone and came back alone? What time?"

"I went alone and I returned alone, yes. I don't know what time it was."

"Did you see anything while you were gone? Hear anything? Unusual, I mean."

"I heard shots just before I came back. Three of them, I think. I came in the back way and sat at the window for some time. I saw a lot of men with Crawley leading them ride away from town."

It sounded straight enough. Ed looked steadily at her for a short space, then picked up his fork. After a while he said, "I asked you about last night because something happened while you were taking your walk. Todd Lester and Cliff Morgan brought their men to town. They made a prisoner of Judge Clauser in his own home, and forced Clauser to hold court and award them one thousand dollars damages. When Crawley got wise and surrounded the place, they used the old man and me as hostages while they made their escape."

"And your father paid? I remember him promising he would abide by Judge Clauser's decision."

A little pink crept into Ed's face. "Yes, he paid it." He went on, his searching gaze still on her face. "The way they acted showed that they had inside information. Last night you took a walk. How do I know that you haven't taken other walks on other nights?"

"To the TL ranch!" she said scornfully. "Even if I knew where it was I imagine it would be quite a walk."

He scowled. "Yes, that's right. But it was suspicious. I had to know."

They finished the meal in cold silence, and Ed left her immediately after. Sandra went to her room with the feeling that things were nearing a climax. The Tates were stirred as never before; this latest humiliation at the hands of Todd Lester was the last straw and their pride demanded that they strike back ruthlessly and without delay.

She took her accustomed place at the window, and a slight commotion in front of the store immediately caught her attention. Half a dozen magnificent horses wearing ornate trappings stood at the hitching rail, and from their backs were dismounting as many handsomely attired gentlemen. From their costumes she knew they were Spanish or Mexican, and one of them stood out above the others. He was tall and lean, with salt and pepper hair and fierce dark eyes. As she watched, Jess Tate himself came from the store to greet him. They shook hands and went into the store together.

SANDRA half thought that after their clash at the dining table Ed would no longer seek her company; but when she descended for supper she found him waiting, once more smiling and with an air of new assurance about him that puzzled and annoyed her. Something had happened, and that something was no doubt connected with the visit of the old Spaniard whom Billy Borden had informed her was *Señor* Pedro Sanchez, owner of

the land upon which Todd Lester grazed his stock.

In order to find out what had gone on, she accepted his apology once more, and they went into the dining room together. He became again the genial, gentlemanly Ed Tate, the witty conversationalist who knew how to keep his lady entertained.

"I've found out who's been carrying information to Lester," he began and Sandra's heart jumped. "It was that old fellow they call Panamint," he said to Sandra's relief. "We're looking for him but haven't found him yet. When we do, we'll deal with him. Anyhow, that's all water under the bridge. We have Lester where we want him now. Pedro Sanchez is going to sell the valley land, and Lester's option only calls for first chance to buy. No matter what he offers, the old man'll outbid him. There's a limit to the cash Lester can raise, and we're prepared to go all the way with him."

"Your father must hate Todd Lester very much to pay twice or three times what the land's worth just to drive him out."

"It isn't that entirely. The old man hates him, but he's not one to throw his money away. He'll get value received and more."

"But after all, the land's only good for grazing cattle."

"Think so? Listen, Sandra, I can't tell you much, because the thing's still hanging in mid-air, so to speak. But it's up to one man now, and he's coming to Briscoe on Tuesday's stage to look the ground over. The old man says it's in the bag, and if it is Briscoe'll be a regular metropolis. Land will increase in value not just twice or three times, but tenfold—a hundredfold. And the Tates will hold it all. Now you know what I meant when I said you could share the prosperity. When the thing is finally settled I'll have a—proposition to make to you."

Sandra caught it—he said "proposition" and not "proposal." She reminded herself that she was an actress and smiled as sweetly as she could. "I—might be interested," she murmured, and tried not to hate herself for saying it.

She went to her room to pass the time between supper and the first show, and took her place by the window. She must watch for Panamint, to warn him of Tate's suspicions.

She thought over the conversation she had just had with Ed. What could possibly happen that would raise Briscoe from an obscure cowtown to a metropolis? Some big manufacturing project? What could they manufacture in Briscoe that couldn't be manufactured just as well at some more accessible place?

Gold? She caught her breath. Panamint declared he was on the track of gold somewhere in the hills. Was it possible that the precious metal existed on Don Pedro's land? It was the most logical thing she could think of. She must get word to Todd Lester.

That night, when she had got rid of Ed, she stole down the stairs with the intention of riding to the TL line camp. There was a faint light in the lobby, and not until she reached the bottom did she see Cal Stoop.

"Goin' somewhere?" he inquired.

"Just for a drink of water," answered Sandra.

"I'll fetch it for you," he offered and went into the kitchen. Sandra drank a glass of water which she didn't want and went back to her room.

An hour later she tried it again. The light was still there and Sandra could see Crawley's night deputy sitting in a tilted chair reading a paper. Ed Tate was evidently having her watched.

Monday came, and with it another visit from Don Pedro. Ed enlightened her at noon and seemed to take a peculiar delight in doing so.

"Well, the old boy went to Lester with Pop's offer of twenty thousand and Lester finally agreed to match it. The Don came in and reported, and the old man jumped it to thirty thousand. Sanchez rode out to tell Lester about it. I don't think Lester can dig up that much."

Sandra saw Sanchez ride up with his retinue that evening. Within ten minutes he rode away again. The Spaniard was evidently getting down to brass tacks. Sandra could hardly wait until supper time to hear the developments from Ed.

Ed was not quite so cocky, but his voice was assured. "Lester must have smelled a rat. Sanchez said he excused himself and went out to talk it over with Cliff Morgan. When he came back he had decided to match our offer. Where he expected to get the cash I don't know. We want to close the deal before the man we're expecting gets here. The old man boosted the ante to forty thousand. I know Lester can't match that."

But he must match it, thought Sandra. If the land is worth so much, he must match it!

THAT night she stole part way down the stairs, saw the night deputy sitting in his chair and went back to her room. She opened the side window and got out on the roof. Behind the building was a pile of boxes that reached to within six feet of the eaves. She lowered herself over the edge and let go. She scrambled to the ground and went into the barn. . . .

There was no campfire on the range this night; she realized it with a sinking heart. But she must find Todd or Cliff or a TL night rider. The broad valley extended to the south; the hills rose against the sky to the north. She reasoned that Sanchez must have his hacienda somewhere to the south and that the TL buildings would be at the foot of the northern hills. She rode north.

She saw the cluster of buildings by the light of the moon which had just risen, and when she neared them a voice challenged and a TL rider came to meet her. He took her to headquarters, and both Todd and Cliff came from a shed near the blackened ruins of their ranch house.

"Sandra!" cried Cliff, striding to meet her. He reached up and lifted her down. "You rode all this way to see me?"

"You or Mr. Lester. It concerns both of you. I had a hint from Ed Tate why Jess is so anxious to buy this land." She told them of her conversation with Ed where Ed had predicted such big things for Briscoe. "Whatever it is, the decision rests with a man they're expecting on tomorrow's stage. I can't imagine what could cause the land to increase in value so much unless it's gold."

"In the valley?" Todd was skeptical. "It's not likely. Might be oil."

"That's it!" exclaimed Cliff. "Oil!"

"Whatever it is, you musn't let Tate outbid you," she said earnestly. "They offered forty thousand dollars this evening. When Sanchez calls on you in the morning, you must match the offer."

"Yeah—match it," said Cliff grimly.

"We can't," said Todd. "Sanchez wants cash."

"But you must! Can't you mortgage the ranch?"

"For forty thousand? I don't know. It would mean riding to Hartsville, delay—" He broke off with a hopeless shrug.

"But you'll try?"

"Yes. Cliff, you stay here and try to put Sanchez off for a day. I'll start for Hartsville right now. Briscoe is on the way. I'll ride home with you, Miss Lee."

Preparations were quickly made. Todd and Cliff talked swiftly, tersely, giving and receiving instructions. Todd's roan was saddled. Cliff helped her back into the saddle and stood there holding her hand and looking up at her with the moonlight on his blonde curls.

"You're sure a trump, Sandra," he told her warmly. "If the deal falls through it won't be your fault. Good-by, honey. I'll be seein' you."

It seemed natural for him to call her endearing names, and she did not resent it. She turned her horse to join Todd, who was watching with inscrutable eyes. As they rode away he said, "Cliff's a fine boy, Miss Sandra. As fine as they make them. Seeing you and him together makes me realize what a friend I lost when I acted so tough and smart."

She said nothing and they rode for a mile or so. Then he took a deep breath and blurted, "There's one thing I want to say. I didn't peep at you—that evening—from the wardrobe. I'm not that low."

"Oh!" she said. It was all she could say, for he put spurs to the roan and she had to follow suit to keep up with him. He rode with his face straight to the front, and she laughed softly to herself. He wasn't quite the brute she had thought him after all!

IT WAS close to dawn when they finally drew up behind the barn. Sandra refused to let him care for her horse, said, "Good night, Mr. Lester. Thanks," and led her mount into the barn. He said, "Good night, Miss Sandra," and sat there on his horse watching.

She hummed as she changed her clothes, and wondered why she did so. She descended the rickety ladder which led from the loft and groped her way through the dark barn to the moonlit alley. At the pile of boxes she stopped and looked back. Todd was still sitting his horse behind the barn. She waved and he waved in return.

She climbed on the boxes and found she could just touch the eaves with her fingertips. She jumped, clutching, and found a hold. Once on the roof she turned to look again. Todd was gone, but as she watched she saw movement near the barn. A man had come into the alley, but he was short and stout, and she knew he was not Todd Lester.

Sudden fear gripping her, she ran to the window and slipped into her room. She was feeling for the catch on the sash to lower the window when a voice spoke from behind her. "Out for another little walk, eh?" It was a nasty voice—the voice of Ed Tate.

Sandra gave a little cry of alarm and wheeled.

He struck a match and lighted the lamp on the dresser, and she stood with her back to the window staring at him. He turned to the front window and drew the shade down to the sill, and while he was doing it Sandra sped across the room to the door. She wrenched at it. It was locked, and the key was gone. She glanced at the open window; there were guards outside and she would not have time to saddle the horse and get away. And if there was any disturbance, Todd Lester would surely turn back to investigate, and she couldn't let him do that. He must ride to Hartsville and get that money.

Ed turned and she was frightened at the expression on his face. She must try to bluff it out. She raised her chin and said coldly, "What are you doing in my room?"

He came towards her, and she wondered how she could ever have thought him a gentleman. All the veneer was gone now. His eyes were slitted and glinting, and his lower jaw was out-thrust.

"You'll find out pretty quick, my innocent little maiden! And if you want a gag pushed in your mouth, start yelling. Yelling wouldn't do you any good anyhow." He halted before her and his probing gaze slowly traveled the length of her slim body while his lips drew back in the sneer she had seen before and understood.

"You're a nice little bunch of femininity, Sandra, as soft and innocent looking as a kitten and as treacherous as a snake. I'm going to clip your claws and draw your fangs. You sure played me for a sucker, and it's my turn now. You and your midnight walks! Wouldn't ride with me because you had no outfit, but you sneak out and ride with Cliff Morgan any time you feel like it! I spill my guts to you, and you carry the news to Morgan. Now I know how the information reached them, you damned little double crossing—"

HE HAD worked himself to a violent pitch. He stepped quickly towards her, and she dodged behind a chair. With desperate strength she raised it.

"Ed Tate, if you come any nearer!"

He laughed savagely and lunged at her. He caught her arm and wrenched and she lost her hold on the chair. They struggled fiercely, Ed with the fury of a thwarted madman, she with the ruthlessness of despair. She kicked him, she scratched his face, she bent and bit his hand with the savageness of a lioness fighting for her cubs. She was only dimly aware of a commotion at the back of the hotel, of yells and curses and the boom of guns. She was panting for breath and her muscles were turning to rubber. She didn't hear the thud of boots on the roof, didn't see the tall form that leaped through the window and came rushing towards them. She wasn't aware of Todd's presence until suddenly she was free, and Ed with a choked cry of surprise was jerked violently away from her. She staggered back against the wall.

The mist cleared and she saw them. She saw Ed, his lips twisted in a grimace of hatred, reach for that hide-out gun under his left arm. She saw Todd leap in and tear his hand away, and then his fist blur in an arc of motion that ended with a solid thud on Ed's jaw. He gave a squeal of pain and went down and Todd leaped after him.

There were more thuds on the roof. Crawley squeezed his bulk through the window, followed by three others. A key rasped in the lock. Jess Tate came in with two more men at his heels. Both groups converged on the men who struggled on the floor, and for another few seconds there was wild confusion.

The door was open, but she did not flee. She was staring at the knot of men in the middle of the room, continued to stare until the confusion died, and they got to their feet. They had Todd Lester, and there were manacles on his wrists. Ed got up shakily, tottered to the bed and sank down on it.

Jess Tate said, "Take him away. Toss him in jail. Post guards. If he gets away, Crawley, I'll have your hide! Go on, get out. All of you but Ed."

"How about the girl?"

"I'll take care of her. Get out."

They went to the door, dragging Todd Lester with them. His hat was gone and there was blood on his face. He looked at Sandra, and there was no regret in his eyes. She said, "Oh, Todd! I'm so sorry!"

He smiled a bloody smile. "I'm not. I'm glad!"

Crawley said, "Come along, you," and they took him out of the room.

Jess Tate came over to the door, took the key from it, closed it and locked it from the inside. He stood looking at her for a moment, then crossed to the bed and spoke to his son.

"You're a fool. A damn fool. Always was, where a pretty woman was concerned."

Ed flared back at him. "She's a spy! She's been gathering information and passing it along!"

"And where did she get that information? How much have you told her?"

"Nothing. Nothing vital. I'm not that much of a fool!"

"I doubt it. Does she know about—"

"I tell you she knows nothing! I suspected her. Tonight I found her gone and told Crawley and set the trap for her. I aimed to tame her good and proper. Why did you have to horn in?"

"It's a good thing I did. Crawley told me about your trap, and I guessed what you'd try. Don't you know there are some things you can't get away with even in Briscoe? This girl has a following. The gang at the Frontier are nuts about her. You yourself gave her a reputation as the innocent little maiden. If you'd harmed her, they'd have torn you apart!"

"She's been riding out nights to see Cliff Morgan. I caught her!"

"You should have been content to trap her and wise them up first. After that they wouldn't care what happened to her. I still say you're a fool."

Ed glared at him sullenly, but Jess was not to be stared down.

Ed said finally, "What're we going to do about it?"

"You're not going to do a thing about it except keep away from this girl from here on. That's an order. I don't trust you near her. When the stage pulls out on Wednesday, she'll be on it." He turned to Sandra. "You understand that? You're leaving, and you're not coming back. If you do, I'll turn Ed loose on you, and no holds barred. Is that plain?"

Sandra said tightly, "When I get on that stage it'll be the happiest moment in my life."

"That's settled then. Meanwhile, you'll not leave town. There won't be any more trips to the TL. You needn't try, because you'll be watched. Come on, Ed. Let's get out of here."

"What are you going to do to Todd Lester?" Sandra said. "You can't punish him for helping me."

Tate's voice was cold. "Todd Lester's wanted for aiding in the escape of a murderer. He's a firm believer in Judge Clauser's decisions. We'll probably hang him."

He went out and closed the door behind him.

SANDRA didn't go down to breakfast that morning either. She hadn't slept at all. She couldn't get Todd Lester out of her mind; the memory of that bloody smile haunted her.

She tossed about on the bed making plans for his rescue that were both fantastic and impossible. She was only a girl, and virtually a prisoner. She had no means of getting word to Cliff. Panamint was absent on one of his absurd gold hunts, and in any event he was a suspect. Just let her be seen talking with him, and he would be seized and condemned along with Todd.

The Tates would get the land they coveted, for now Todd would be unable to arrange the necessary loan. But that was secondary. Todd's danger was the important thing. "We'll probably hang him," Jess Tate had said.

That afternoon she saw Don Pedro Sanchez come riding up in all his splendor; she saw Jess Tate come out to welcome him. They remained inside for quite a while this time. When at last they came out, both were smiling and talking affably. The Don raised his hat politely and rode away with his attendants, and she saw Ed go hurrying across the street towards his father.

Jess called the news to him while Ed was still a dozen feet away, and Sandra heard his words plainly. "Well, boy, it's done! The valley land is ours. Morgan was unable to match our offer, the cash has been paid, and the deed is in my safe."

She got up, heartsick. The Tates had won.

She went outside and walked to the Town Hall. She went inside and through the doorway marked MARSHAL'S OFFICE. Crawley was seated behind his desk and a deputy lounged nearby. She said, "I'd like to see Todd Lester."

"Mr. Lester," said Crawley heavily, "ain't seein' nobody today. Visitin' day is Thursday. Come back then." He knew, of course, that she was leaving on Wednesday. Sandra dejectedly left the office.

She was about to cross the street to the hotel when the evening stage passed her. Remembering that the mysterious man who held the fate of Briscoe in his hands was expected on it, she followed it to the store.

It rocked to a halt, and Billy Borden caught the mail sack which the guard tossed him. The door opened and an elderly man alighted and turned to assist a lady. The door hid them partly, and it wasn't until it was closed that she had a good look at them. And then she stood rooted, and for once in her life was guilty of letting her lower jaw sag in an unladylike manner.

The elderly man was Grandfather Cyrus Lee, and the lady was her mother!

FOLLOWING her first hasty impulse, Sandra fled blindly. Jess Tate had come out of the store and was shaking hands with her grandfather. Her mother had turned to point out their luggage. She ducked her head and hastened across the street and into the hotel.

She ran up to her room, locked the door behind her, and sank on the bed to collect her scattered wits. Grandfather Lee was here in Briscoe. Briscoe, of all places! And she was supposed to be at school. He must not see her, but she must see her mother as soon as she possibly could.

She heard them ascend the stairs with Cal Stoop listening to instructions about clean linen, bath water, meals. It was, "Yes, Mr. Lee; no, Mr. Lee; yes'm, Mrs. Scott." They were shown into the two rooms on the other side of the hall, and by listening carefully Sandra determined that the front room, the one opposite her own, was her mother's.

Cal Stoop went downstairs and presently the supper bell sounded. She heard them descend, but of course she couldn't go. Cal came up and rapped on her door. "Supper, Miss Lee." She said, "I'm not coming down. I don't feel well." She imagined she heard him chuckle as he left.

They seemed a long time at their meal, but finally she heard her mother come upstairs. She crossed to the window and looked out. Jess Tate and her grandfather were crossing the street to the store. She unlocked her door and went quickly across the hall and rapped. The door opened.

"Hello, mother."

"*Sandra!* Sandra, darling! Whatever are you doing here!"

She told her mother everything—or almost everything. "We just can't let Grandfather know. I'm leaving on the morning stage and we must keep him from seeing me until then. He'd be furious if he knew. I've got to sing tonight at—at Briscoe's foremost place of amusement, then my engagement is ended."

"And you have no news? You've learned nothing of James or Blaine?"

"Nothing, Mother. But I will! There's a man here at Briscoe I want to learn more about. He's an orphan; doesn't remember his mother, and his father died when he was very young. His name's Todd Lester, but it may not be his real name. We'll just keep on hoping, Mother."

"Yes," her mother sighed, "it's the only thing left. Sandra, I just couldn't stand it any longer. Your grandfather had to come out here, and I had the chance to come along. I thought that I might help. You probably wouldn't know your father if you saw him. I would."

"I understand, dear." Neither had realized how quickly the time had passed. They had lighted the lamp an hour before, and now it was quite dark.

"I've got to change and run along," Sandra said. "I'll be home after midnight, and you can let me in and we'll talk some more."

She kissed her mother and went back to her room. This would be her farewell appearance. On the morrow she would say good-by to Briscoe. A reluctance to leave seized her. There was so much remaining to be done. There was Todd. She must find out the truth about him. And she wouldn't let them hang him. Her mother had money, and Jess Tate could be bought. Suppose it turned out that he was her brother! That would explain why she was attracted to him, even after the rough handling and humiliation she had suffered. For there was an attraction. There always had been. There were moments when she wanted to run her fingers

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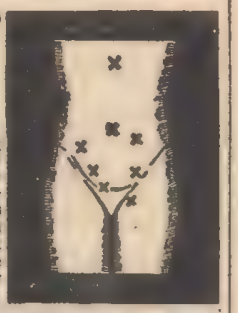

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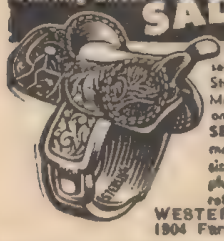

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through his dark curls. That would be sisterly affection, wouldn't it? Well, sort of. Jess Tate would surely hang him unless something were done very quickly. And she was leaving in the morning. She had no choice, she had to go.

IT WAS late when she reached the Frontier. The show was on, and she heard the men in the audience clapping and whistling and calling for her. She hurried out on the stage and looked at them over the footlights. All she saw were the indistinct blurs which were their faces.

She sang their favorites—ballads of home and mother and the sweetheart who still waited. And suddenly she found herself talking to them, telling them the story of her search for the father and brother she had never known.

She couldn't see the elderly man who sat beside Jess Tate, and who, at her first appearance, had blinked incredulously and had leaned forward to study her intently. She hadn't heard him ask Jess, "Who is that girl?" Nor did she hear Tate's answer, "Sandra Lee. Say, that's funny! Same name as you!"

She spoke simply, earnestly, the words coming without any effort. "And so you know now why I came to Briscoe, and you know why I stayed. You've been my friends, and I'm telling you this on my last night in Briscoe. For Mr. Tate told me I must leave tomorrow, and his word is law in Briscoe."

"Like heck it is!" somebody cried. "Stay with us, Miss Lee!"

Others took up the shout. "Stay! Stay! The heck with Jess Tate!"

She held up her hands for silence. There were tears on her lashes.

"That's so sweet of you! I love you for it. But I must go. . . . Why? It seems that I'm some sort of menace to his plans. He owns this town, and today he bought the valley where Todd Lester and Cliff Morgan graze their cattle. He has wanted that land for a long time because something is going to happen to make it very valuable."

GOOD-BY TO BRISCOE

A voice thundered from the rear, "That'll be enough of that! It's not part of your act! Get off the stage!"

A brawny miner leaped to his feet and answered. "And that's enough out of you, Jess Tate! Set down and shut up. Go ahead, Miss Lee."

A chorus of "Set down, Jess!" came from all parts of the house, and Jess Tate for once was licked. He sat down.

Sandra pressed her advantage. "Jess Tate wanted that land. It wasn't Briscoe he was thinking of, it was himself. To get it, he first had to drive off Todd Lester and Cliff Morgan, so he set Jake Winslow up as a rancher and tried to frame Todd for cattle theft. He planned to have Cliff Morgan shot down here in the Frontier by a hired gunman who would kill Cliff while Winslow held his attention, but Cliff had been warned and shot first. So they tried him for murder before a justice of the peace and sentenced him to hang!"

There was a deep silence now. Men were hearing in blunt, simple words what they had known in their hearts but had been afraid to say. And now a slim young girl was saying it for them, was openly defying the great Jess Tate.

She was saying, "You know how Todd Lester saved Cliff at the last moment. You know how he escaped. Ed Tate told me that Morgan was a killer, justly and legally convicted. I found out otherwise. He told me Todd Lester was a thief. I know now that he isn't. You men know it, too. But the Tates had to have that land, and if getting it meant the death of two decent young men, or of a dozen, or a hundred, what did it matter?"

Somebody growled, "The danged skunk!" and other voices muttered.

She raised her hands again for silence and went on, "When Don Pedro Sanchez decided to sell, Jess saw his chance to get the land by outbidding Todd Lester. This morning he bought the land. It's supposed to be good for nothing but grazing, but do you know how much he paid for it? He paid Don Pedro forty thousand dollars, cash!"

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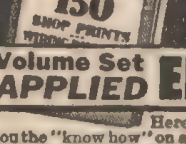

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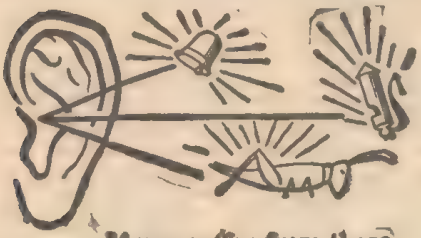

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PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

BACK in the audience, Jess Tate got angrily to his feet. Cyrus Lee grabbed him by the coat tails and pulled him down. "You sit there and listen!" growled Grandfather Lee. Jess sat.

There were murmurs of amazement and growing anger. This was news! The slim young girl went on, "On several occasions I rode out to the TL to report what I had learned. It was all so unfair, and Ed had made himself so obnoxious that I had no scruples about playing the spy. Last night he found me gone from my room. He sent the hotel help away and—" she faltered here— "and waited for me to—to come in.

"Todd Lester had ridden back with me and waited to be sure that I got in safely. Ed was waiting. He surprised me and—and there was a struggle. Todd fought his way past the men outside and came to help me. He knocked Ed down and was choking him when Marshal Crawley and Jess Tate and four other men came in. They handcuffed Todd and took him to jail. Jess Tate said he'd hang. Why? Because he'd helped me!"

"By heaven, no!"

An elderly man had got to his feet, and now he came down the aisle, his keen, dark eyes glinting in the gloom. He went up the steps to the stage and Sandra saw him. Grandfather Lee!

She backed away, dismay written on her face, but Cyrus Lee came over and put his arms about her and drew her to him. Then he turned to the gaping audience and thundered, "Gentlemen, this little lady is my granddaughter! As she told you, she's supposed to be at school, and if I'd met her before this performance I'd have sent her packing. But now, by Jericho, I'm proud of her!"

"Grandfather!" cried Sandra. "Oh, Grandfather!" She buried her face in his shoulder.

He faced them, his head high, his shoulders back. "The story she has just told moved me as it moved you. And it's true! Anybody who says it isn't will have me to deal with! For Jess Tate did want that land. He wanted it because he heard, I

don't know how, that a railroad was coming to Briscoe and he knew the land would multiply in value.

"I am the president of that railway company, and the final decision was left to me. I'd reached that decision before I came to Briscoe, but I wanted to be sure I was right. This evening I drove a short distance and looked the land over. The construction beyond Briscoe would be too costly to warrant a branch line through Briscoe. There will be no railroad running through that valley, and Jess Tate must figure a way to get his forty thousand dollars back."

Sandra raised her face and gazed proudly at him. He glanced down at her and his face momentarily softened. Then he looked at the audience and once more his features hardened.

"As for this man, Todd Lester, I don't know him from Adam, but if anybody thinks he's going to hang him, he's out of his mind. If Jess Tate or anybody else has charges to prefer against him, let him do it through the regular channels. And if Lester isn't released instantly, I'll go to Hartsville myself and lay the matter before the prosecuting attorney and also the sheriff!"

"Three cheers for Grandpap!" yelled somebody.

They were given with a will, and when the noise had died down a husky miner mounted a chair and shouted, "Let's save time by gettin' Todd outa the calaboose right now! Who wants to go with me and help?"

They went in a body. And Sandra and Grandfather Lee were in the lead!

There wasn't much to it. The mob of cheering, singing citizens descended on the jail like a swarm of locusts, and the guards, after a hasty look, decided that it was time to leave there. The turnkey turned over his keys, and Todd, utterly astonished, was released.

They carried him to the hotel on their shoulders, Grandfather Lee and Sandra leading them, their arms about each other's waists. They sang, "Glory, glory hallelujah," and Grandfather Lee sang as lustily as any.

AN ASTONISHED and somewhat frightened Mrs. Scott awaited them. Her eyes widened at sight of the two in the front and for a moment she thought that her dignified and austere father was surely drunk, especially when he yelled to her, "Fine granddaughter I got! Never had so much fun!"

They milled about the lobby, celebrating. A keg of whiskey and a barrel of beer were fetched in at Cyrus Lee's order and even Mrs. Scott was persuaded to take a little nip. And presently a great clatter of hoofs were heard and the whole TL crew came riding up. Somebody had ridden out with the news and Cliff and the boys had burned up the trail. Cliff Morgan came striding in, his hat pushed far back on his blonde curls and a wide smile on his face. He lifted Sandra off her feet and kissed her heartily, and she hugged him with gusto.

Todd Lester stood watching, that inscrutable smile on his face, an ache in his heart. Cliff set her down and slapped Cyrus Lee on the back. "Grandpap, from what they tell me you'll sure do to ride the river with!"

Sandra turned to Todd and found his somber gaze on her. Remembering her enthusiastic embrace, she blushed. He said, "I told you he was a fine boy, Sandra. Be good to him."

"But it—it isn't that way at all!" she protested. "It's just that I like him very much. Don't you understand?"

He smiled wistfully and said that he did, but she knew he didn't.

The party lasted until three in the morning. Then the cowboys and miners shook hands with Cyrus Lee and called him a good sport, they patted Sandra on the back tenderly, like fathers or brothers, and told her what a sweet kid she was. They even shook hands with Mrs. Scott as daintily as possible and swore that the daughter of such a swell guy and the mother of such a swell kid must surely be pretty swell herself. And they went away still singing "Glory, glory hallelujah" and the only ones left in the lobby were Grandfather Lee, Mrs. Scott, Sandra, Todd and Cliff.

It was then that Sandra said, "Todd, there's one thing I must know. Cliff told

me that you're an orphan. Tell me, is Lester your real name?"

"Yes," he said sadly, "There's no doubt about it. I wish I could say it's Scott, then I'd at least be your brother."

A voice drifted in from the street. "Whoa, you old pieface! We're home!"

"It's Panamint!" cried Sandra.

Panamint came staggering up the steps and into the lobby. In his arms he carried a bulging burlap sack. It was so heavy that he dropped it just inside the doorway.

"Cliff, I found it! Rich as all getout! Thousand dollars to the ton! Brought along some samples—enough to make the Tates and Winslows look like beggars!" He glanced past Cliff and seemed to freeze. He gasped, blinked, and tottered. Then he pushed Cliff violently aside. "Nellie!"

"James!" cried Mrs. Scott, and ran to him, her arms outstretched. "Father, it's James!" Then Panamint was holding her, and she was sobbing, "It's been so long!"

The room began whirling about Sandra. James! James Scott! Panamint was her father! And she would have said good-by to Briscoe in the morning!

Mrs. Scott pushed herself away almost fiercely. "Our boy, Blaine! Where is he?"

"Why now, he's right here." Panamint raised a finger . . . and pointed it at Cliff!

The room was really spinning now. Sandra gasped and put out her hands like a blind person. A strong arm went about her, and she sagged against a woollen shirt. She looked up. She was in Todd Lester's arms and it felt wonderful.

IT WASN'T such a complicated story after all. Panamint told it to them there in the lobby. He had planned his escape with little Blaine very carefully. He dressed the boy in girls' clothing and changed his own appearance and their names. He made his way to Montana to the ranch of a good friend named Morgan. There he left Blaine to be brought up.

He had a great obsession: to find gold enough to put him on an equal footing with his in-laws. When he had done this, he would return with his boy and assert himself as a husband and a father. But the wealth he dreamed of was never realized, and he saw that it was better to let the little boy grow up as Clifton Morgan.

But he had to be near his son. He paid frequent visits to the Morgan ranch, and when Cliff started out on his own, Panamint followed. And always there was the hope that some day he would realize his dream. And now at last he had realized it.

"I reckon I was the only one who hadn't heard of Sandra's search. I'd have known right off that she was my daughter."

Grandfather Lee looked at his watch. "Great guns! Nearly five o'clock! Where's Sandra? If she wants to leave on the stage she'll have to get some sleep."

A voice answered from a dark corner. It was a soft, contented voice, very much like a purr. "I've changed my mind about saying good-by to Briscoe, Grandfather. Or rather, Todd changed it for me. He knows of some nice range farther north. We're going to drive the cattle up there and build a nice new house, and—"

"Live happily ever after," finished Todd.

Grandfather Lee winked at Panamint. "You're a lucky man," he said. "You've found a wife and a son and a daughter, and now something tells me you're going to find a son-in-law. Let's see if there's another drink in that whiskey keg!"

(The End)

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 27

1. The Southwest, particularly Arizona and New Mexico.
2. *Amigo* (ah-MEE-go), *compadre* (coam-PAH-dray), *compañero* (coam-pahn-YAY-ro), *primo* (PREE-mo) which literally means "cousin," and sometimes *hermano* (ayr-MAH-no) which literally means "brother."
3. Down to the blanket, sold his saddle, between a rock and a hard place, busted, down to his last tail feather, nothing to jingle, short in the pocket, scraping bottom, looking for free board, etc.
4. Winter, because snowshoe rabbits are grey except in winter.
5. Olsen-Stelzer, Justin, Nocona, Leddy, Posada, Bronco, Powder River, Palace, Blucher, etc.
6. New Mexico.
7. Oklahoma.
8. Idaho.
9. Gone over the range, hung up his saddle, bucked out, cashed in, last roundup, gone on the long trail, no breakfast forever, sacked his saddle, passed in his chips, took the big jump, etc.
10. A cowboy's batching quarters, particularly a lonesome line camp cabin, in masculine disorder.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

ALL RODEO remembers Pete Knight, one of the greatest bronc-riders ever to come out of the chutes. In this issue his story is told us by a rodeo writer who many a time held his breath watching Pete ride out a bad one. Take it away, Jerry Armstrong. . . .

There's an old cow country saying that a top bronc-rider can ride horses others can't put a saddle on, and that certainly fitted Pete Knight. He was a wonder on bucking horses, riding with a long rein and spurring 'em like hell, in the buck-off or pay-off style still in vogue with top-hand bronc-riders.

When Pete was entered in a bronc-riding contest and had drawn a salty mount—and he generally did—it was almost a foregone conclusion that he'd win. We've heard cowboys argue over who had placed second or third or fourth. But if we asked: "What about first money?" the answer invariably was: "Hell, everybody knows Pete Knight won!"

He wasn't very tall, but stocky and strong. He was quiet and dark, and many believed he was part Indian. When saddling a bronc, he did it slowly, quietly, never showing nervousness or overconfidence. When he'd climb down onto a rough mount, find the stirrups with his feet, get a good grip on the rein, pull down the brim of his hat and holler: "Let us out of here!" there'd be a wide grin on his face. Watching him, you knew Pete enjoyed riding bucking horses.

Although Pete Knight was raised in cow country, he was born back East in Philadelphia. He was just a little tyke when the Knights moved to Oklahoma, and after a brief stay ambled northward across the Canadian Line to acquire a ranch out of Crossfield in Alberta. There young Pete rode horses all the time. He took to topping the rough ones—green colts and neighbors' spoiled mounts—and contested at local rodeos.

He broke into the big time at the Calgary Stampede in 1924. From there Pete went on to contest all over Canada and the U.S., and over in Australia and England. In '32, '33, '35 and '36 he was the Rodeo Ass'n. of America's champion bronc-rider.

In '32 Pete married a pretty girl from Hot Springs, Ark., Ida Lee Avant. Five years later he became a proud papa and decided to buy a ranch in California and settle down.

That spring—'37—he won the bronc-riding at Sonora, Calif. The following week-end at the King City Stampede he didn't finish so high, but split third and fourth monies with Doff Aber in the bronc-riding finals. Then Pete, the missus and the bambino journeyed to Hayward for the Harry Rowell Dublin Canyon Ranch rodeo. The first day Pete, Eddy Woods and Pete Grubb all tied and split second and third monies. Doff Aber placed first.

On Sunday, May 23rd, Pete's mount was a rough old equine named Slowdown. As the chute gate opened there was the familiar grin, the wild scratching—another thrilling Pete Knight money ride. Then something went wrong, and the champion was thrown. There were screams from the stands and the equine outlaw's heavy hoofs came down on the fallen rider. Cowboys quickly helped Pete to his feet. His face was pale and grimacing with pain.

Pete said, "I'll be all right in a few minutes." They were his last words—in a few minutes he was dead!

Pete—who could top horses many a cowboy couldn't put a saddle on—had made his last ride.

JERRY ARMSTRONG

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names.

Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Anyone Know Any Gossip?

Dear Editor:

I've written poems, verses and long letters to you and none of them has ever been published. Now I say just this, "Please, I want some pen pals. I love to write, and will answer all letters, exchange snaps, and gossip." I'm 26 years old and my nickname is Dolly.

THELMA M. GORMAN

108 S. 2nd Ave.
West Reading, Penn.

Two Southern Belles

Dear Editor:

Here are two southern belles from the heart of Dixie. We'd like to crash Our Air Mail. We are cousins; Midge is 15 and Button 16. We both like all sports, especially swimming, roller-skating and playing all types of ball games. We'd like to hear from you folks all over the world, so write, and we'll tell all we know of the world's most famous city, where we live.

ELEANOR ("MIDGE") ALLEN
VIRGINIA ("BUTTON") ALLEN

933 Independence St.
New Orleans, La.

Not the Wastebasket

Dear Editor:

Got room for a lonesome girl from Canada? I'm 14, and I like most sports—oops! not the wastebasket, please! As I was about to say, my favorite sports are hiking, swimming, ice skating and horseback riding. I'm not one of these gals with a "slim, willowy figure" but I guess I can pass with a shove (a good hard one.) I'd like everybody to write, especially Westerners.

BUNNY JOHNSON

1360 Elm St.
White Rock, B. C.
Canada

Another Overseas Reader

Dear Editor:

For quite some time I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES and find it a most enjoyable magazine. I'd be very glad to hear from pen pals in the United States and I promise to answer all letters. I'm 17 years old, with light brown hair and blue eyes. My chief hobbies are dancing and sports.

DAVE NORTON

2 Heather St.
Claremont, Cape Town, S. A.

Cheer Up a Sailor

Dear Editor:

I'm a British Merchant Seaman, and whenever I arrive in the States I get as many back numbers of RANCH ROMANCES as I can. Being at sea is pretty dull, and I get hardly any letters to cheer me up. I'm 21 with blond hair, blue eyes and I'm just 6 feet tall. I like roller and ice skating, and I love swimming and just about anything musical. I can also tell you interesting things about any part of the world. So here's hoping I shall get plenty of letters from everyone. It'll make me a lot happier on board ship.

ALEC J. HANLEY

57 Pen Park Rd.
Southmead
Bristol, England

Persistence Pays

This is my second attempt to get my plea printed in your excellent magazine, and I intend to keep on trying until I make it. I'm a young fellow of 29, 5' 10" tall, I have several hobbies including letter writing, and I've also had some very dangerous and exciting pastimes which I'll be glad to describe in letters. I'd like to hear from people from all over the world, except South Africa, and I'll answer all letters promptly. If my letter box overflows, the postman can always knock at the door.

JACK MILAN

7 Hampton Court
Pearson St.
Port Elizabeth
S. Africa

Amateur Page

EDITOR'S NOTE: This page is composed of original cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West and written by amateurs only. For each contribution published we pay $2.00, and more than one contribution may be submitted by any person. Each contribution MUST be the original work of the person submitting it. Address: The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned nor can we enter into correspondence about them.

The Teacher

THE BOYS were dressed up fit to kill,
A-waitin' for the teacher;
For she had come by stage today,
A tall and lovely creature.

Gus and Bill and Bob were there,
Boys from the Rocking R.
The only one a-missin'
Was homely Johnny Farr.

But he had been there last year,
All rigged out in his best,
And everyone now knew his luck,
Much better than the rest.

For he and last year's teacher
Were settled on their ranch,
A-wonderin' how the boys made out,
With this new one named Miss Blanche.

Georgia Whipple Lewis, Richmond, Mo.

Sage and Moonlight

PURPLE sage and yellow moonlight,
My old guitar and you;
Deep blue sky and shining stars,
Winking at us two.
As I strum a prairie tune
The world is mine today,
And when I look into your eyes
My cares just fade away.

Purple sage and yellow moonlight,
Your little hand in mine,
Moonbeams dancing in your hair—
In and out they twine.
As I hold you in my arms
My heart will skip a beat.
The moon will slyly wink its eye
As our lips shyly meet.

Purple sage and yellow moonlight—
Could I ask for more?
A Texas moon and prairie,
A girl that I adore.
All these things that I possess
Make my life so bright,
As I gaze at a star and strum my guitar
And sing of purple sage and moonlight.

Eleanor Nowak, E. Chicago, Ill.

New Colt

AWKWARD little feller!
Up! Try your spindly legs.
Mind your mother's nudgin';
She's wise—she's learned
Man's mulish ways.
A year you'll have for childhood,
Perhaps not quite a year—
Trainin' must begin today.
Up! And look around you,
See the beauty of
The meadow, hear the shame
Of Dobbin's chains.
Smell the scent of man and
Learn it—learn it well.
Say! Had a strappin',
Fine young son myself today!

Waldo T. Boyd, W. Des Moines, Ia.

Ranch at Twilight

THE SOOTHING sigh of the night wind,
The whine of a coyote's call,
The lonesome bawl of a maverick
A hush, as the shadows fall.

A gleam of light from the ranch house,
The smell of food from the door,
The laughter of men well contented,
The clink of their spurs on the floor.

The cool, sweet smell of the prairie,
The twang of a cowboy's guitar,
The deep, gleaming blue of the heavens,
With its brand of a silver star.

Saddles hung over the gate-posts,
Dusty boots lining the wall,
Rest for the hard-riding waddies,
Peace and contentment for all!

Dee Campbell, Daytona Beach, Fla.

For Men Who Like to Hunt

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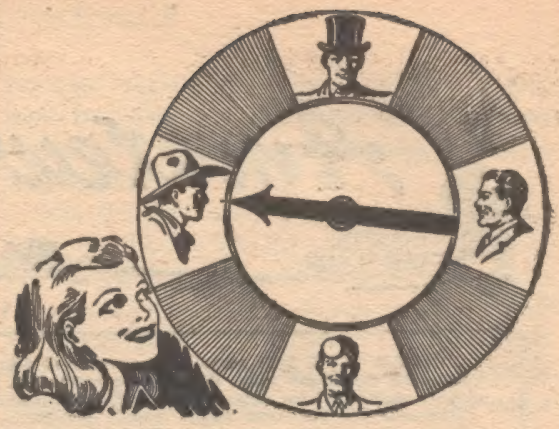

Man of Capricorn *Dec. 21—Jan. 21*

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

MEN OF Capricorn are thinkers as well as doers. They are vital, enthusiastic and should be self-assured. They hate injustice and intolerance and are willing to take practical steps when confronted with it. Nor do they easily accept defeat, having the courage it takes to carry on difficult enterprises.

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